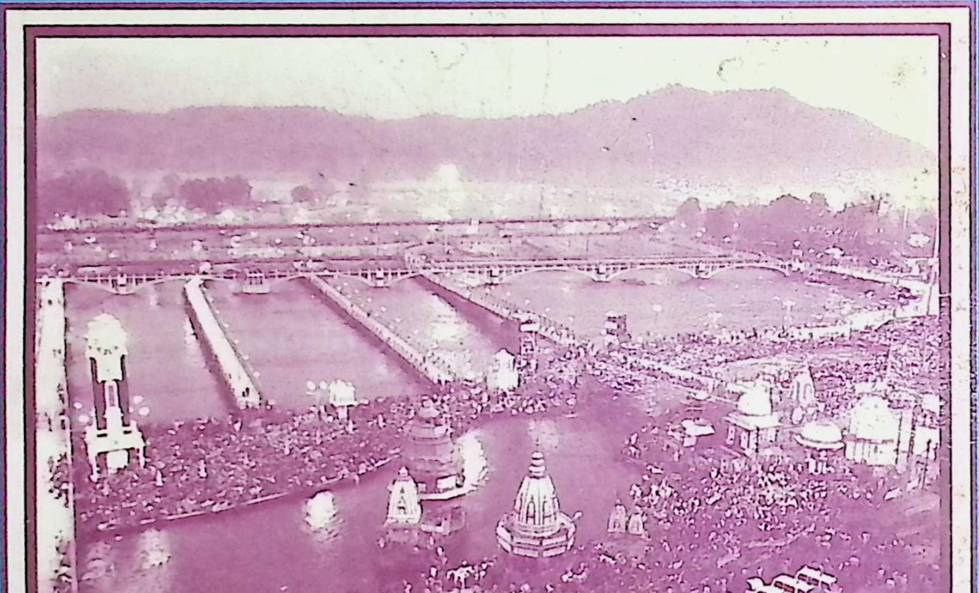
# KUMBHA MELA

## Pilgrimage to the Greatest Cosmic Fair



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PILGRIMAGE STUDIES

Edited by

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पुस्तकालय

पुस्तक संख्या ......................................................

वर्गीकरण संख्या ......................................................

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वर्गीकरण सं. ..................

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यह पुस्तक नीचे अङ्कित तिथि या उससे पूर्व लौटा दी जानी चाहिये। यदि पुस्तक निर्धारित तिथि से अधिक समय तक पाठक अपने पास रखेंगे तो 50 पैसे प्रतिदिन के हिसाब से विलम्ब शुल्क देय होगा।

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# Foreword

The mela of Kumbha at Prayāga is not simply a multitudinous congregation of people from all over the Hindu world, eager to have a meritorious dip at the confluence of the holy rivers - Gaṅgā, Yamunā and the invisible Sarasvatī at an astrologically opportune moment; it is much more. It is indeed a massive visual representation of the Hinduistic religiosity in its most intensive and most eloquent form which is underlined by a deep faith in ancient tradition. It is a most vivid and impressive document of the age-old, unbroken continuity of this religion and at the same time a living proof of the underlying fundamental unity of its various sects. Big and small, rich and poor, old and young, healthy and frail, householders and mendicants, all come here in lacs and lacs in search of their *seelenheil* and for the peace of their soul. Living in make-shift shelters mostly in cotton-tents or even under free heaven on the sandy banks of Gaṅgā and Yamunā, cooking in open with woods and cowdung-cakes, most of them spend a full month here imbibing the spiritual atmosphere created by a large number of religious discourses given by enlightended masters, performing various rituals at the rivers and enjoying the religious entertainments offered them free of cost in form of devotional dramas, dances and music. No invitations are sent out to them, no announcements are made; but still they come in millions from every nook and corner of this country - by trains, by buses, by horse-carts and bullock-carts, on elephants and horses and also walking the way. Kumbha Mela is indeed a unique phenomenon.

The name of Dr. D. P. Dubey is neither unknown nor new to the students and scholars of pilgrimage studies. He has done a yeomans' service to this discipline by publishing a number of outstanding monographs under the banner of the Society of Pilgrimage Studies. A very widely read, erudite scholar of Ancient Indian History, his main *forte* and interest lies in Tīrtha-studies and his scholarly work on the *kṣetra* of Prayāga, recently out, is sure to find an honourable place in the scarce literature on this fast upcoming and growing field of pilgrimage studies.

In the present work Dr. Dubey has tried to comprehend and explain the phenomenon of Kumbha in its various facets and aspects through five scholarly contributions to this subject by an equal number of Indian and Western scholars who may be termed not only as pioneers but also authorities in this field. The contributions cover a wide range of historical, cultural, social, religious and philosophical aspects of this unique bathing festival and provide an all round picture of this extra-ordinary phenomenon.

There is presently a lot of interest accompanied by a genuine inquisitiveness about the nature of this forthcoming event and its wonderful details among the people which is, incidentally, also the first Kumbha of the present millennium. A number of organisations and societies are striving to make this event a memorable one in the history. I feel that the present work can serve as a nice *vademecum* not only for common readers but also for the scholars of Indic disciplines and comparative religion.

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October 7, 2000

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# Preface

The Kumbha Mela has been described as the greatest pilgrimage in the world. It is a mela where devotees, both householders and Samnyāsins, gather in millions to earn merit for ensuring the realization of the fourth and ultimate *puruṣārtha,* that is, *mokṣa*. The Kumbha Mela takes place in an area too small for the vast congregation of devotees attracted by the auspicious occasion. It is in this space that millions camp for a month with frequent influx of thousands of pilgrims who come there only for a day or two on very auspicious occasions. It is held at a time when extreme cold prevails; the living conditions there in the temporary huts that are raised to house the pilgrims are extremely primitive; the danger of epidemics breaking out is great; and the fear of sudden stampede causing thousands of deaths and untold miseries is all pervasive. Despite all these, millions of people from all the corners of India and even abroad are not daunted by these hazards and throng there to do their religious duty. This is perhaps indicative of the people's determination and strong religious commitment. But is there nothing more than this that the Kumbha Mela signifies ?

Of course, the primary purpose in going to the Kumbha Mela is religious for which people hazard all the dangers and risks that staying there for at least a month implies. But what is this religious duty ? It is customary to associate Kumbha Mela with those spots where drops of nectar fell as a result of the tussle between Suras and Asuras for gaining exclusive possession of the pitcher of nectar that came out of the ocean when it was churned by them. Thus all the spots where Kumbha Mela is held at certain auspicious occasions are considered to be sacred because they were made sacred by nectar drops, the liquid identified in the Vedic literature with the gods. However, the significance of the Kumbha Mela held at the confluence of three rivers-Gaṅgā, Yamunā and Sarasvatī - of which only two are visibly present goes even deeper. Speaking generally, people gather on these spots to relate themselves with the divine ground of being. It signifies the linking of the finiteness of human existence with the infinite plenitude of the absolute which is the real and invigorating source of truth, value and meaning. In fact, the mela has become an occasion and an event where people come in search of immortality. And immortality they do get in the form of spiritual enlightenment and an everlasting peace of soul which carries them across the sufferings of human life into a domain lying beyond death and destruction.

The significance of Kumbha Mela at Prayāga does, of course, incorporate this. However, it incorporates something more. As J.L. Mehta notes, Prayāga of the Kumbha fair fame where three major streams meet represents "the three major streams of the Indian religious traditions: Gaṅgā representing the central Vedic strand; Yamunā representing the mystic *bhakti* strand of the Vedic Soma-vision; and the hidden Sarasvatī representing the heritage of language-born knowledge, hidden because existing only in the human carriers." These streams, it does not need to be pointed out, flow down from the *parame vyoman*, symbolizing the reaching down of the Unknown through these streams in response to the perennial but often submerged and ignored urge of human beings to transcend the narrow and petty concerns of their own finite and not infrequently self-engrossed existence.

The Kumbha Mela at Prayāga thus symbolizes the concrete expression of this urge. It is this urge that irresistibly draws millions of people to the banks of the Triveṇī on the occasion of the Kumbha where they seek release from the humdrum everydayness. It is in this sense that the significance of the Kumbha Mela cannot be said to be restricted to any sectarian notion of Hinduism; it acquires a universal significance since it represents a universal urge, although not always recognized and articulated, of human beings.

This collection of important articles focuses on the history and significance of the Kumbha Mela. It has been brought out for the benefit of all those who like to know more about the phenomenon of Kumbha. A large number of popular papers and books have been brought out in the past and are still being published at the time of every Kumbha Mela. Most of these are based on beliefs and ideas which lead us nowhere, and serve only to distort the true perspective on the Kumbha fair, its nature and significance. It is hoped that the present volume bringing together the well- researched ideas of five scientific scholars will serve to correct the inaccuracies and deficiencies of the popular works, and enable all those interested in the history and ritual of Kumbha to see the problems connected with these from the right angle. Lastly, we wish to record our most sincere gratitude to all the scholars whose articles have been included in this volume. We also heartly place on record our indebtedness to the different journals which originally published these incorporated articles.

November 12, 2000 D. P. DUBEY

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# Kumbha Mela : Origin and Historicity of India's Greatest Pilgrimage Fair

## D. P. Dubey

### Introduction

Fairs and festivals have been an important feature of group life all over India from the very early times. They are held on auspicious occasions as cultural happenings for public worship and rejoicings. Their number in India is a legion. By far the most imposing bathing festival is the Kumbha Mela, which is ritualistically known as the Kumbhaparva. On this occasion countless pilgrims from every nook and corner of the land, speaking different languages and dialects, wearing distinct sectarian marks, donning various types of dresses, and observing different manners and customs, meet together for a holy dip in the sacred waters. The Kumbha Mela is celebrated in a twelve year cycle by rotation at four sacred places - Haridvāra on the Gaṅgā, Prayāga on the Gaṅgā-Yamunā- saṅgama, Nāsik on the Godāvarī, and Ujjayinī on the Śiprā, whenever a particular astronomical conjunction (*yoga*) occurs. One is here confronted with the notion of intersection of the trajectories of cosmic forces, symbolized by the moving planets and constellations, and flowing rivers and human lives. This represents the highest state of water symbolism in Hinduism. The Kumbha Mela, attracting millions of devouts periodically to the above sacred places, has had immeasurable influence in strengthening the religious and cultural foundations of Hinduism. There are rarely a few melas in India as traditionally Hindu and symbolic of the whole Hindu culture as the Kumbha Mela. This denotes the most distinct, elaborate and ancient ritual tradition of pilgrimage reflecting the ultimate sense of sacrality related to a place and time; in fact it shows the sacred emergence and integration of space and time. The untold tremendous faith that attracts people for generations, without any propaganda or publicity, all at one time, to the sacred place is still the vital strength of religious belief and practice. "Only as an immediate witness of some of the melas", says Miloslav Krása[1], "is it possible to realise the depth and extent of the roots of this faith". The general belief that nectarine waters of the sacred rivers of India mysteriously come together at the sacred place at that time accounts for this faith and desire of cleansing through the ritual bath.

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There are few melas in the world as challenging and bewildering to Western visitors as the Kumbha Mela. Miloslav Krása[2] found the Kumbha Mela at Prayāga "the greatest fair of all nations and of all times". Sidney Low, who visited one of the melas at Prayāga during the tour of the Prince and Princess of Wales in CE 1906, was wonder struck at its majestic sight; he[3] wrote,

> "Nothing more impressive, picturesque and pregnant with meaning and significant than the Kumbha Mela can be witnessed in India".

He further remarked,

> "Until you have looked upon one of these tremendous gatherings of humanity, many aspects of Indian life and character must be hidden from you ... You see Hinduism at its best and its worst; you begin to realise faintly the hold that this jumble of devotion, metaphysics, and rank idolatry has upon the masses of the people; you observe Brahmanism working hand in hand with a crude and savage felishworship; you have before you such multitude of men and women as you may not meet twice in a lifetime".[4]

The mela brings to life in an organic and cosmic way a personal experience of the Indian Folk and Sanskritic traditions on a scale never seen elsewhere.

## The Origin and Historicity

The origin and historicity of the Kumbha Mela has been a subject of much discussion amongst Indologists. "The Hindus throughout India", regretted Banerjee[5], "observe this occasion with great sanctity for a very long time and none has given any particular period of its origin". In his *Discovery of India* Nehru[6] observed,

> "In my old city of Allahabad or in Hardwar I would go to the great bathing festivals, the Kumbha Mela, and see hundred of thousands of people come, as their forebears has come for thousands of years from all over India, to bathe in the Ganges".

According to him[7], "these melas are ancient and lost in an unknown antiquity". Believing participants to this festival hold it as old as the creation itself. Its antiquity has caught the imagination of many, such as Sidney Low[8], who quipped in the context of the Kumbha Mela at Prayāga, "The celebration is older than Mohammadanism, older than Christianity, perhaps older than Brahmanism itself". Some scholars[9], on the basis of preserved and accessible historical evidence, assert that the pilgrimages known as Kumbha Mela do not date back the seventeenth-eighteenth century CE. Others[10] hold that the date of the origin of the Kumbha Mela is not exactly known. Much of the discussion on this issue is found inadequate and unsatisfactory. This state of affairs is due to the neglect and insufficiency of the analytical study of myths and legends pertaining to the subject. In spite of some attempts made to discover a pattern, the problem could never be put to a systematic analysis. It may, however, be noted that about the Kumbha Mela there is almost nothing written; most of the information is simply a hearsay and based on oral tradition. There are only bits and pieces of knowledge out of which a coherent account of it remains to be framed.

According to the orthodox view, the antiquity of the Kumbha Mela goes back to the Vedic times. To substantiate this assertion the following two passages from the *Atharvaveda* are often quoted; other quoted passages are the *Ṛgveda* I.116.7, X.89.7; the *Yajurveda* (*Mādhyandina*) 19.87; and the *Atharvaveda* XVI.6.8[11].

(i) *caturaḥ kumbhānścaturdhā dadāmi.* AV, IV.34.7.

(ii) *pūrṇaḥ kumbho = adhi kāla āhitastam.* AV, XIX.53.3.

The four 'kumbhas' in four places mentioned in the first sentence are interpreted by the traditional scholars as the four localities where the Kumbha Melas take place. The expression 'pūrṇaḥ kumbhaḥ' in the second sentence is understood as signifying the Pūrṇa Kumbha Mela which occurs every twelfth year as distinct from the Ardha Kumbha Mela which takes place every sixth year. Bonazzoli[12] has critically examined the purport of these two sentences and has shown that they have been wrongly adapted to signify the Kumbha Mela by separating them from their original contexts. The first sentence, which belongs to a hymn in glorification of a certain sacrifice called Viṣṭārī, indeed, runs like :

> "I give four pitchers, in four several places, filled to the brim with milk, curds (Soma), and water. Abundant with their overflow of sweetness, these streams shall reach thee in the world of Svarga (heaven), whole lakes with lotus-blossom shall approach thee"[13].

The verse is commented upon by Sāyaṇa in the following way :

"I put four pitchers full of ingredients like milk, etc. in four ways according to the division of the directions-east, west, etc."[14].

The second sentence is a part of the verse which runs as :

> "On Time is laid an overflowing beaker : this we behold in many a place appearing. He carries from us all these worlds of creatures. They call him Kāla in the loftiest heaven"[15].

Here 'pūrṇaḥ kumbhaḥ' according to the commentary of Sāyaṇa[16], refers to the god Time, because the hymn is dedicated to him.

It is notable that none of the Vedic verses refers, even in the slightest way, to the Kumbha Mela. The Vedic passages quoted above speak of 'kumbha' which means a 'pitcher', but there is no symbolic representation of a pitcher in this mela. Vedic commentators also do not explain these *mantras* to refer to any fair. Even Sāyaṇa, who often superimposes on the Vedic passages the interpretations of his own times (14th-15th centuries CE) does not connect these *mantras* with the Kumbha Mela, although in his age *tīrthayātrās* were very common. Therefore, possibly one is left with no option but to agree with Bonazzoli[17] that 'the above adaptations are quite recent and possibly restricted to small circles of adherents.' Sāyaṇa's silence about the Kumbhaparva does not, however, necessarily disprove its possible existence in his time. It might be of interest to note that the Kumbhaparva does not figure in the Sūtra-works, Smritis, Epic-Purāṇic texts, and Dharmaśāstra-digests also. Kumbha, however, is mentioned in the *Vāyu Purāṇa*[18] as a holy place fit for the performance of the *śrāddha* rite. It is doubtful if it refers to a place where the Kumbhaparva is observed. This Kumbha of the *Vāyu Purāṇa* may be identified with a *tīrtha* named Śrīkumbha on the Sarasvatī river referred to in the *Nāradīya Purāṇa*[19] where a holy bath is believed to bestow the benefit of *yajña* performance upon the devotee. In a brochure the verse-*aśvamedha-sahasrāṇi vājapeyaśatāni ca / lakṣam pradakṣināḥ prithivyāḥ kumbhasnānena tatphalam* - is found quoted from the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* to prove the Purāṇic authority for this mela[20]. The verse is, however, not found in the printed editions of this Purāṇa. The foregoing discussion thus demonstrates that the tradition of Kumbhaparva possibly does not enjoy a respectable antiquity.

## The Two Traditions

The origin of Kumbhaparva is lost in mythical legends. Myths are created as solutions to mysteries, and legends are formed to perpetuate such solutions. Furthermore, legends may become traditions after passage of time. Two traditions are in circulation about the origin of this festival : one that ties its origin with the pre-existing Epic-Purāṇic myth of the churning of ocean, and the other that connects it with astrological considerations. Bonazzoli[21] has discussed these two traditions and rightly concludes that "the distinction between the two is not sharp and they could have been one in the beginning".

**Epic-Purāṇic Tradition** : The so-called Epic-Purāṇic tradition is in relation to the widely circulated legend of the churning of the Ocean of Milk. According to it[22], the gods and the demons churned the milky ocean at the beginning of time to wrench from it its divine treasures. Following all the treasures, the pitcher filled with the nectar (*amrita-kumbha*), the potion of immortality, emerged finally from the milky ocean. Immediately a fight for its acquisition began between the gods and the demons. In the scramble, the gods were baffled and the demons succeeded in getting hold of the nectarine pitcher. When the cause of the gods was thus lost, Jayanta, the alert heir-apparent of the paradise, at their incitement, changed himself into a rook and escaped with it into the heights of heaven. The fraud was brought to the notice of the demons by their preceptor Śukrācārya, consequently they chased Jayanta but in vain. By way of precaution the gods sent four planets to accompany Jayanta : the Moon to protect the pot from flowing forth, the Sun to protect it from bursting, Jupiter to protect it from the attack of the demons, and Saturn to protect it from the fear of Jayanta lest he should devour its contents. The nectar is said to have splashed the earth at four places as it was whisked away to heaven by Jayanta : Haridvāra, Prayāga, Nāsik and Ujjayinī, the sites becoming especially sanctified by its very touch for all the times to come (Fig. 1). As Jayanta took twelve days to complete his flight and a divine day is equal to one human year, the Kumbhaparva recurs at these four places every twelfth year in a cyclic order. The Sun (along with his son Saturn), Moon, and Jupiter were on the vanguard and had protected the jar, therefore the festival is celebrated only on the conjunction of these planets in the specific zodiacal sign, Aquarius.

No text supports the above account. Though the story of the churning of the ocean is found in the Epic-Purāṇic texts[23], the splashing of the nectar at the four places is nowhere mentioned. The relation between the pitcher containing divine liquid and the Kumbhaparva is, therefore, highly fanciful and imaginary. It appears that this Epic-Purāṇic legend has been verbally grafted on the Kumbha Mela to provide it with an antiquity and hoary past.

A somewhat different Epic-Purāṇic story[24] is also in vogue. It is said that Guruḍa brought nectar from heaven to release his mother Vinatā from the bondage of the mother of serpents, Kadrū. He placed the pot of nectar before the sons of Kadrū and Vinatā was freed. But Indra (or his son Jayanta) stole away the pitcher and fled towards heaven being pursued by the serpents. Four drops of nectar fell down from the jar on the aforenamed four places, and therefore these

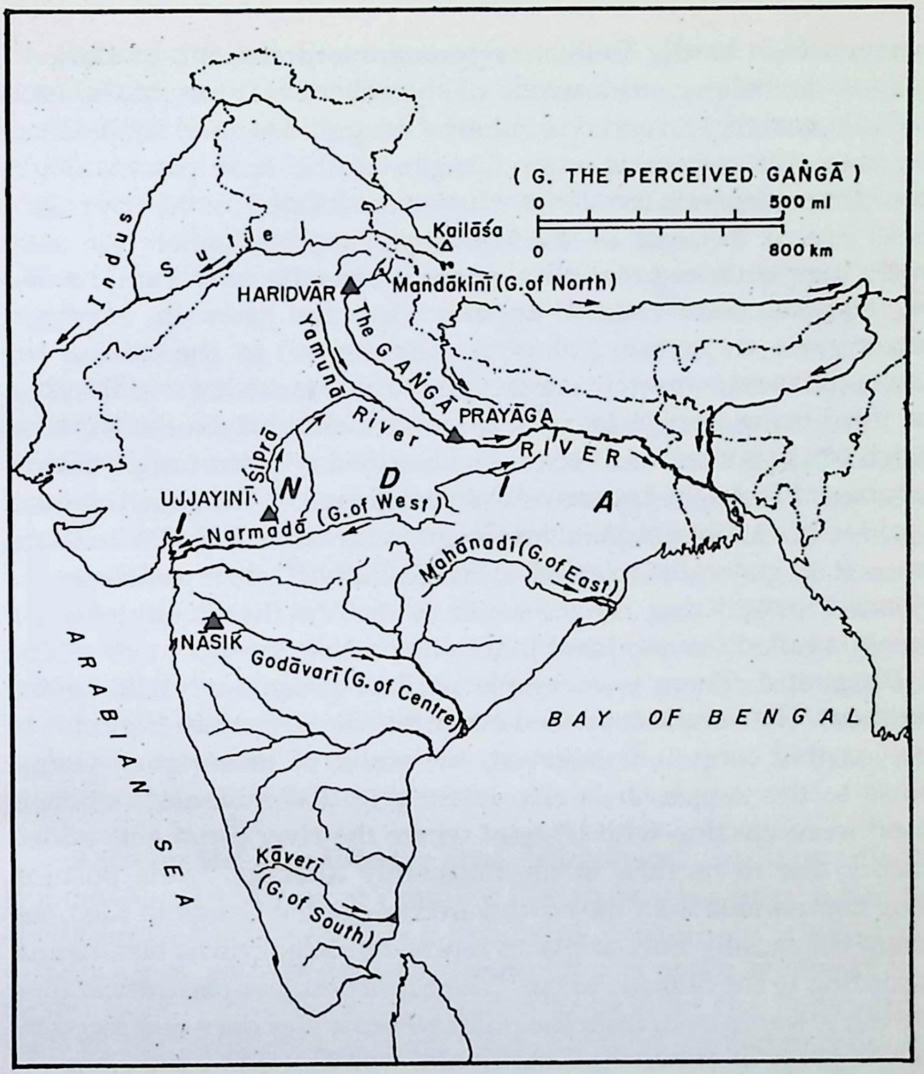
( G. THE PERCEIVED GAṄGĀ )
0
500 ml
0
800 km
Kailāsa
Mandākinī (G.of North)
HARIDVĀR
Indus
Sutlej
Yamunā
The GAṄGĀ
River
PRAYĀGA
RIVER
Śiprā
UJJAYINĪ
I N D I A
Narmadā (G.of West)
Mahānadī (G.of East)
NĀSIK
Godāvarī (G.of Centre)
BAY OF BENGAL
ARABIAN SEA
Kāverī (G.of South)

Fig.1 : Spatial pattern of Kumbha sites and Gaṅgāization

places became fit for celebrating the Kumbhaparva. "The second part of the story, i.e. the falling of the nectar at the four places", opines Bhattacharya[25], "is not found in any of the known Epic-Purāṇic texts, though Garuḍa's bringing of nectar for his mother[26] is narrated in many of them".

There is no ground for the view that the mela was named after the 'kumbha' (pitcher) in which immortality bestowing liquid was kept. Though 'in its entirety the Epic-Purāṇic mythical tradition about the origin of the Kumbhaparva contains a hodgepodge of themes which hardly facilitate rigorous interpretation', as Darian[27] leads us to believe, an analysis of the salient features of the mela would reveal that it served to enhance the grandeur and sublimity of the large life-sustaining river Gaṅgā. Of the four places, where according to legends the *amrita* fell, two are located on the river Gaṅgā itself; one at the base of the Himalayan foothills where the river enters the plains and the other where it joins the river Yamunā and the invisible Sarasvatī. It appears that the worship of rivers concentrates on certain points in their course. In the case of the Gaṅgā the most important contact points are Haridvāra and Prayāga, the third being Gaṅgāsāgara[28]. The river Godāvarī, on the banks of which Nāsik is situated, is so much identified with the Gaṅgā that, as a matter of fact, it is known as Dakṣiṇa Gaṅgā.[29] The sage Gautama is said to have brought the river Gaṅgā in the form of Godāvarī there, hence it is generally referred to as Gautamī [30]. It is stated in the *Brahma Purāṇa*[31] that to the south of the Vindhya mountains the Gaṅgā is called Gautamī and that to its north is known by the name of Bhāgīrathī. There is a temple at Rāmaghāṭa in Nāsik on the Godāvarī. The temple is opened every twelfth year when Jupiter is in Leo. At that time, it is believed, the water of the original Gaṅgā comes to the temple. It is also interesting that a similar notion is found in connection with Ujjayinī where the river Śiprā gets added sanctity due to its flow in the northernly direction[32], the position being comparable with the northward flow of the Gaṅgā in Kāśī; the Gaṅgā is specially holy at places where its stream turns northward. According to the *Skanda Purāṇa*[33], the Śiprā becomes *pūrvavāhinī* (one flowing towards east) from the point where it was once embraced by the Gaṅgā. A *liṅga* named Gaṅgeśvara, worshipped by the Gaṅgā[34], is found on the southern bank of the Śiprā in Ujjayinī[35].

Thus, the Kumbhaparva seems to be a ritual bathing festival chiefly associated with the river Gaṅgā in its origin and character. The water in its different forms is often an object of worship, especially the flowing water. From very early times, divinity and power are associated to all rivers, but some are more holy than others, and the holiest of all is the Gaṅgā due to its many special qualities such as having been created by the three gods of Hindu trinity[36] and made of all *tīrthas*[37]. The Gaṅgā is the archetype of the sacred waters, to which other water bodies are compared in sanctity; this perception and belief led to establish the process of Gangaization of Indian culture. The sanctity of the Gaṅgā is pre-eminently established in India since the time of composition of the *nadīstuti-sūkta* of the *Ṛgveda*[38]. The Gaṅgā is important in both its physical and symbolic existence. It is deemed to confer immortality to its devotees. In Indian religious life, the Gaṅgā water is equated with the deathless liquid in properties. In support of this belief Darian[39] has quoted an Epic passage which exclaims, "as *amrita* is to the gods, so Gaṅgā water is to human beings"[40]. It may be pointed out that in Ujjayinī the water of the Śiprā is also said to be endowed with the properties of embrosia[41]. If so, Gaṅgā water might have been *amrita* to the unknown authors of the Kumbhaparva legend. The Kumbha (pitcher) itself becomes one of the Gaṅgā's most distinguishing sculptural features; it first appears with the river goddess on the Varāha cave frieze at Udaigiri around CE 400 and becomes more and more common as the Gaṅgā theme reaches maturity in Indian art during the medieval period. The Kumbha (pitcher) is a symbol of fertility and expresses several values, mostly related to the generative and purifying power of water. It may also be understood as an expression of the Gaṅgā's birth from Brahmā's water jug. However, 'it seems', writes Darian[42], 'highly unlikely that pilgrims at the Kumbha Mela draw such connections'.

**Astrological Tradition** : The astrological tradition of the Kumbhaparva is far more complex. The mela takes place when the *kumbhayoga* commences. This astronomical conjunction is said to be of four types, each being associated with one of the aforesaid four sacred places[43]. Some verses, claimed to be from the Purāṇas but without precise references being given, are often quoted to show the validity of the Kumbha Mela at the specified sacred places. Since much confusion prevails about the auspicious time when the Parva must be held, it is necessary to produce the verses here :

- When the Jupiter (Brihaspati) is in the sign of Aquarius (Kumbharāśi) and the Sun enters the Aries (Meṣarāśi), Kumbhaparva is held at Haridvāra.[44]
- The Kumbhaparva occurs at Prayāga when Jupiter enters the zodiac Aries and the Sun and the Moon are in the Capricornus (Makararāśi) on the new moon day of the month of Māgha.[45]

- When the Sun and the Jupiter are in the Leo (Simharāśi), the Kumbhaparva is celebrated on the Godāvarī at Nāsik[46].
- The Kumbhaparva takes place at Ujjayinī when the Jupiter is in the Leo and the Sun enters the Aries.[47]

Alternative astronomical conjunctions are also provided for the celebration of the festival at the three sacred places—Prayāga, Nāsik and Ujjayinī :

- When the Sun is in the Capricornus and the Jupiter moves into the Taurus (Vrisarāśi) on the new moon day of the month of Māgha, the Kumbhaparva takes place at Prayāga[48].
- When the Jupiter, Sun and Moon are in the Cancer (Karkarāśi) and it is *amāvāsyā* (new moon day), the Kumbhaparva is held on the Godāvarī at Nāsik[49].
- When the Jupiter is in the zodiac Libra (Tularāśi) and the Sun and the Moon dwell together on the new moon day of Kārttika, the salvation bestowing Kumbhaparva occurs in Dhārā/Ujjayinī[50].

These verses are generally ascribed to the *Skanda Purāṇa*. They are, however, not traceable in the extant editions of this Purāṇa; therefore nothing can be said about their authenticity. Though the authorship and chronology of the verses recorded above are unknown, they might have been composed at a time when the tradition of Kumbhaparva had already become quite popular in India. It may be noted that P.V. Kane[51], while dealing with the Kumbhaparva in the 'list of Vratas', has not cited the source of his statements. There is no mention of any such astronomical conjunction as the *kumbhayoga* in astronomical/astrological works. Even the Sanskrit-English Dictionary of Monier Williams does not contain the word 'kumbhayoga', though it mentions the names of several astronomical conjunctions. Therefore, this *kumbhayoga* is apparently a later interpolation.

The verses usually quoted for holding the Kumbha Mela at Prayāga, Nāsik and Ujjayinī do not contain the word 'kumbha', the name Kumbha fits in only with the mela of Haridvāra. The Epic-Purāṇic version of the story about the origin of the Kumbhaparva shows that it should be celebrated at the specified sacred places in the year in which there is a conjunction of the Sun, Moon and Jupiter in the zodiac Aquarius[52]. It appears that the Kumbhaparva derives its name from an auspicious occasion of ritual bathing that used to take place at Haridvāra every twelfth year when Jupiter was in Aquarius and Sun entered Aries. Such an astronomical conjunction is referred to in the *Nāradīya Purāṇa*[53] as a sacred time for bathing in the river Gaṅgā at Haridvāra. This shows that the Kumbhaparva was originally observed at Haridvāra and was named after the Kumbharāśi (Aquarius), for the festival occurs mainly at the time of Jupiter being in Aquarius which is represented in astrology as a water-carrier. At Prayāga, Nāsik and Ujjayinī, the *kumbhayoga* is not connected with any celestial body being in the Kumbharāśi. Therefore, there is no apparent reason as to why the melas held in these sacred places should be styled Kumbha Mela at all. The Purāṇas praise bathing in the Gaṅgā-Yamunā-saṅgma (Fig. 2) at Prayāga in the month of Māgha when the Sun is in the sign of Capricornus (Makara). Certain days are held in high esteem for the purpose and fifteenth day of the dark-half (*amāvāsyā*) of that month, being regarded as the mouth of the year, is one of them. The idea of holding the Kumbhaparva at Prayāga may be explained in the light of the ritual bath on this day of the month of Māgha. This day of the Makara-saṅkrānti month becomes doubly auspicious every twelfth

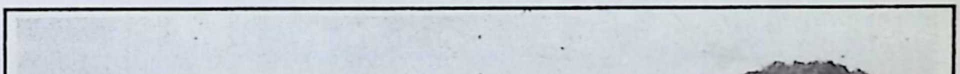

Fig. 2 : Gaṅgā-Yamunā-Saṅgama under the fort at Prayāga, 1965

**Table 1**

| Year | Place | Hindu Month (Roman) | Position of Cosmic forces | Name of the Parva |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0 | Haridvāra | Caitra (March-April) | Jupiter × Aquarius, Sun × Aries | Kumbha |
| 3 | Prayāga | Māgha (January-February) | Jupiter × Aries or Taurus, Sun & Moon × Capricornus | Kumbha |
| 6 | Nāsik | Bhādrapada (August-September) | Jupiter × Leo, Sun × Leo or Sun, Moon & Jupiter × Cancer | Kumbha |
|  | Haridvāra | Caitra | Jupiter × Leo, Sun × Aries | Ardha Kumbha |
| 9 | Ujjayinī | Vaiśākha or (April-May) Kārttika (October-November) | Jupiter × Leo, Sun × Aries or Jupiter, Sun & Moon × Libra | Kumbha |
|  | Prayāga | Māgha (January-February) | Jupiter × Scorpio, Sun × Capricornus | Ardha Kumbha |
| 12 | Haridvāra | Caitra (March-April) | Jupiter × Aquarius, Sun × Aries | Kumbha |

year when Jupiter happens to be in Aries. Moreover, the first year called Prabhava of the sixty-year Jovian (Bārhaspatya) cycle begins on Māgha-śukla 1 when the Sun and the Moon occupy the *nakṣatra* (asterism) Dhaniṣṭhā and are in conjunction with Jupiter[54]. The promulgators of the Kumbha Mela might have utilized this rare occasion to serve their purpose and called it the Makara Kumbhaparva. Similar may have been the notions behind the celebrations of the Kumbhaparva at Ujjayinī and Nāsik. Ablution in the river Śiprā at Ujjayinī in the month of Vaiśākha in general and on the full moon day (*pūrnimā*) of that month in particular is eulogized in the *Skanda Purāṇa.*[55] According to the *Śiva Purāṇa* and the *Varāha Purāṇa,* bathing in the river Godāvarī at Nāsik is highly meritorious when the Sun and Jupiter are in Leo.[56] The *Brahma Purāṇa*[57] says that three and a half crores of *tīrthas* that exist in the three worlds (heaven, earth and the netherworld) come for a bath in the river Godāvarī when Jupiter is in Leo and that bathing in the Bhāgīrathī (Gaṅgā) every day for sixty thousand years confers the same merit as a single bath in the river Godāvarī at that auspicious time. Similarly in the *Tristhalīsetu*[58] it is said, "Bathing in the Godāvarī when Jupiter is in Leo is everywhere equal to bathing in the Jāhnavī (Gaṅgā)". Thus, there is no evidence to show that the melas held at these three places were called Kumbha Mela in the beginning; the mela at Nāsik always being known as Siṁhastha[59]. The nomenclature of Kumbha Mela in this regard does not seem to be a right one. Therefore, there is some weight in the suggestion of Bhattacharya[60] that 'the term Kumbha was prefixed to the melas held at Prayāga, Nāsik and Ujjayinī later on after the nomenclature of the Kumbhaparva at Haridvāra'.

The place, time of occurrence, and the positions of planets and zodiac determining the Kumbha Melas are given in table 1 which shows that the mela occurs mainly on the conjunction of Jupiter with some specific constellations and the factor *saṅkrānti* (the point of time when the Sun leaves one zodiacal sign and enters another) is not a desideratum.

Midway between the two Kumbha Melas comes the Ardha Kumbha Mela at Haridvāra and Prayāga. Of this division there is no śāstric authority, except the solitary verse[61] of doubtful authorship. It appears that the tradition of Ardha Kumbha Mela is not of much religious significance; two sites Nāsik and Ujjayinī do not deem it fit

### Table 2

*Kumbha Mela*

| 1. Haridvāra : Meṣa saṅkrānti* | | | | | | 2. Prayāga : Māgha amāvāsyā | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| V. S. | C. E. | Tithi | $P_1$ | $P_2$ | Differ ence (in years) | V. S. | C. E. | P1 | $P_2$ | Differ ence (in years) |
| 1972 | 1915 | Vk 30 | 10/24° | 0.0° | 12 | 1962 | 1906 | 1/6° | 9/23° | 12 |
| 1984 | 1927 | Cs 15 | 10/28° | 0.0° | 12 | 1974 | 1918 | 1/10° | 9/23° | 12 |
| 1995 | 1938 | Vk 13 | 10/2° | 0.0° | 11 | 1985 | 1929 | 0/11° | 9/23° | 11 |
| 2007 | 1950 | Vk 11 | 10/6° | 0.0° | 12 | 1997 | 1941 | 0/15° | 9/23° | 12 |
| 2019 | 1962 | Cs 9-10 | 10/10° | 0.0° | 12 | 2010 | 1954 | 1/23° | 9/18° | 13 |
| 2031 | 1974 | Vk 7 | 10/14° | 0.0° | 12 | 2021 | 1965 | 0/23° | 9/4° | 11 |
| 2043 | 1986 | Cs 5 | 10/18° | 0.0° | 12 | 2033 | 1977 | 0/27° | 9/4° | 12 |
| 2055 | 1998 | Vk 2-3 | 10/22° | 0.0° | 12 | 2045 | 1989 | 1/2° | 9/18° | 12 |
| 2067 | 2010 | Vk 30 | 10/26° | 0.0° | 12 | 2057 | 2001 | 1/7° | 9/4° | 12 |
| 2078 | 2021 | Cs 1 | 10/0-1° | 0.0° | 11 | 2068 | 2012 | 0/7° | 9/4° | 11 |
| 2090 | 2033 | Cs 15 | 10/5° | 0.0° | 12 | 2080 | 2024 | 0/12° | 9/4° | 12 |

Table *contd.*

| 3. Ujjayinī : Vaiśākha purṇimā | | | | | 4. Nāsik : Bhādrapada amāvāsyā | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| V. S. | C. E. | P1 | P2 | Difference (in years) | V. S. | C. E. | P1 | P2 | Difference (in years) |
| 2002 | 1945 | 4/24° | 0/27° | 12 | 1989 | 1932 | 4/8° | 4/0° | 12 |
| 2014 | 1957 | 4/28° | 0/29° | 12 | 2001 | 1944 | 4/11° | 4/1° | 12 |
| 2025 | 1968 | 4/2° | 0/27° | 11 | 2013 | 1956 | 4/17° | 4/18° | 11 |
| 2037 | 1980 | 4/6° | 0/15° | 12 | 2025 | 1968 | 4/19° | 4/6° | 12 |
| 2049 | 1992 | 4/10-1° | 0/29° | 12 | 2037 | 1980 | 4/26° | 4/23° | 12 |
| 2061 | 2004 | 4/15° | 0/20° | 12 | 2049 | 1992 | 4/24° | 4/0° | 12 |
| 2073 | 2016 | 9/19° | 0/27° | 12 | 2060 | 2003 | 4/4° | 4/0° | 11 |
| 2085 | 2028 | 4/23° | 0/25° | 12 | 2072 | 2015 | 4/8° | 4/1° | 12 |
| 2097 | 2040 | 9/27° | 0/27° | 12 | | | | | |
| 2101 | 2051 | 4/0-1° | 0/29° | 11 | | | | | |

P1, Position of Jupiter in Zodiac/degree. P2, Position of Sun in Zodiac/degree. Vk, Vaiśākha kṛṣṇa. Cs, Caitra śukla. The Meṣa saṅkrānti, which now a days occurs on April 13/14, occurred on April 8 (AR VI, 312) in CE 1795.

for celebrations.

Table 1 also shows that the mela is celebrated regularly at an interval of three years, starting from Haridvāra and followed by Prayāga, Nāsik and Ujjayinī, respectively. But this conceptual position does not appear to have been observed in practice. It is true that the Kumbha Mela at Prayāga takes place after three years of that at Haridvāra and the gap between the melas of Prayāga and Nāsik is also of three years. But interval between the Kumbha Mela at Nāsik and that at Ujjayinī is not of three years; they are celebrated the same year. This deviation in practice from theory is intriguing and is not adequately explained by astronomical or any other exercises. When Kumbha Mela at Ujjayinī falls in the month of Vaiśākha, it takes place at Nāsik in the month of Bhādrapada the same year. Sometimes the mela at Nāsik occurs earlier than that of Ujjayinī. In that case the Kumbha Mela at Ujjayinī follows that of Nāsik the next year. The gap is, however, never of one full year, though the Vikrama Saṁvata may change. Their precession is not fixed. The mela at Nāsik precedes the mela at Ujjayinī for three consecutive terms and the latter comes before the former at five times (see Table 2). This phenomenon is ascribable to the interconnection of Jupiter in Leo at these two places; Jupiter is in Leo for one year once in twelve years. This knotty problem may, however, be solved by adhering to the astronomical provision which requires the Kumbha Mela of Ujjayinī to be held in the month of Kārttika when the Sun is in Libra. This tradition has somehow become obscure and has fallen into disuse for quite a long period. This accounts for the non-existence of the gap for three years between the Kumbha Mela at Ujjayinī and that at Nāsik..

The pilgrimage to Kumbha Mela lasts for a whole month, but certain days are supposed to be especially favourable for mass bathing. The day for actual bathing at Hari kī Paurī in Haridvāra is the *pūrṇimā* (the full moon day) of Caitra. The main bath at Saṅgama in Prayāga and Rāmaghāṭa in Nāsik is taken on the *amāvāsyā* (the new moon day) of Māgha and Bhādrapada respectively. The *pūrṇimā* of Vaiśākha is the auspicious day of Kumbha bath at Rāmaghāṭa in Ujjayinī. However, if the obscure but correct astrono- mical tradition is followed, it would be *amāvāsyā* of Kārttika for the Kumbha bath at Ujjayinī. Thus, at Haridvāra and Ujjayinī final bath is taken on the full moon day; at Prayāga and Nāsik on the new moon day. The *tithi* (lunar day), being governed by the lunar system of reckoning, may vary at Haridvāra (see Table 2), but the solar day is always the same; the Sun's passing the first point of Aries marks the end of Caitra and the beginning of Vaiśākha. Similarly, when the Parva is observed, according to the alternative astronomical conjunctions at Nāsik and Ujjayinī it is the *pūrṇimā* of Śrāvaṇa month and the *amāvāsyā* of Kārttika respectively. There is no variation in the *tithi* of mela at Prayāga.

Opinions differ regarding the cyclic period of the Kumbha Mela. According to some scholars[62], it occurs regularly every twelfth year at a sacred place. Others[63] are of the view that unless the particular astronomical conjunctions come into existence the Parva cannot be held. They assert that a Kumbhaparva may be celebrated even in the eleventh or thirteenth year after the holding of the earlier one. It seems that the Kumbha Mela has not always followed the twelve year cycle, and that it may recur in the eleventh year or even in the thirteenth year. The view is supported by the calculation of years for the celebrated melas at Prayāga; the figures are : Vikrama Saṁvata 1950, 1962, 1974, 1985, 1997 and 2010[64]. This is due to the retrograde movement of the planet Jupiter and the period taken by it in revolving round the Sun; Jupiter takes 11.86 years for its revolution round the Sun[65] which is less than 50 days in twelve solar years, i.e. 4343 days. According to astronomical calculations, Jupiter moves one house further after eighty four years. Therefore, out of seven Kumbhaparvas six recur every twelfth year and the seventh one comes in the eleventh year. The argument that the Kumbhaparva occurs every twelfth year is maintained in the same way as it is often said that such and such village is a village of wrestlers (*mallānām grāmaḥ*), which, of course, only means that there the wrestlers are in majority in that village. This problem can be understood with the help of Table 2.

The number twelve has its own astronomical importance. It has a philosophico-spiritual significance also. As Gupta[66] puts it, 'Man has two kinds of organs : *panca jñānedriyas* (five organs of perception) —the skin, tongue, eyes, ears, and nose; and *pañca karmendriyas* (five organs of action)—the anus, the organ of generation, hands, feet and speech; the eleventh organ is the mind and the twelfth is the intellect. Since attendance at the Kumbha Mela is piously regarded as the stepping stone for *mokṣa* (salvation), which is vouchsafed as the ultimate reward, it is expected that the religious minded and virtuous people, who have shunned all carnal passions by mastering these twelve components to become real recipients of salvation, would attend the Kumbha assemblage. Further, it is incumbent on them to demonstrate to others by their own example the efficacy of this practice.' There seems to have been a mystical power involved in the number twelve in ancient India. "Twelve months compose the year; twelve letters go to the composition of a foot of metre called *jagatī*; twelve are the minor sacrifices; and twelve, according to the learned, is the number of Ādityas (Suns)."[67] The *Agni Purāṇa* notes that the first letter of the name of any particular manifestation of a god should be coupled with the twelve vowel letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, that the auspicious *cakra* should have twelve radii just as the lotus has twelve petals[68] and that the human body is divided into twelve parts[69]. Those who contemplate the *mantra* of twelve letters (*Om namo bhagavate Vāsudevāya*) do not return to the cycle of continual births and deaths.[70] John W. Spellman has suggested that the number twelve "is intimately connected with water or the absence of water. If the number twelve is related to water, it is also related to Varuṇa, who was associated with water, but the domain of Varuṇa was pre-eminently that of morality or *dharma* and thus water also becomes associated with *dharma* ..... The symbolic significance of the number twelve is probably that of the restoration of *dharma* or the expiation of guilt".[71] And ordinary people throng to the Kumbha Mela for expiating their sins and Dharmācāryas for restoring *dharma* in the society, it may be noted.

The celebrating years of some of the melas had been controversial. The Kumbha Mela at Ujjayinî was announced by the State Government to be held in CE 1956. But it came to be postponed for a year because ascetics did not do so in that year[72]. Some astrologers ruled that the Kumbha Mela at Prayāga should come off in CE 1965; others advocated its celebration the next year in CE 1966. The Melas of 1929 and 1941 met with the similar fate. As a matter of fact, such controversies are a regular feature in determining almost all the Hindu festivals, which arise on account of the difficulties in calculating the astronomical conjunctions.

## Antiquity

The antiquity of the Kumbha Mela is shrouded in mystery. The Chinese pilgrim, Hsüan Tsang, who attended the sixth quinquennial assembly organised by king Harṣavardhana at Prayāga in the month of Māgha in CE 643, supplies the first historical reference to religious festivities at Prayāga[73]. Some scholars[74] think that this account of the Chinese pilgrim implies the visit of Harṣavardhana to Prayāga on the occasion of Ardha Kumbha Mela which occurs after five years. But it is wrong to assume that the Kumbha fair was being held in the times of Harṣavardhana, for in the accounts of Hsüan Tsang there is no mention of a fair called Kumbha. The fair associated with king Harṣavardhana was only a religious occasion in the month of Māgha, in which he used to distribute his accumulated wealth of five years. The king cannot be said to be the instigator of this religious congregation[75]. Moreover, the practice of holding quinquennial assemblies and donating everything in them has been a common phenomenon observed by foreign travellers with reference to a number of kings of India and abroad. Fa-hien (CE 399-414) for example, noted the particular case of the king of Kashgar, while Hsüan Tsang referred to the examples of the kings of Kapis and Malwa, besides Harṣavardhana who also resorted to this practice.[76]

Tradition credits Śaṅkarācārya (ninth century CE) with the organisation of the Kumbha Mela at Prayāga. He is believed to have transformed it from a gathering of single group and of local significance into a pan-Indian meeting of ascetics and extended it to other three sacred places.[77] But for want of proof it cannot be corroborated. Other stories are also in circulation among the faithful ones. Some say that the interval of twelve years is due to the fact that the congregation of the Maharṣi Sanaka, Sanandana, etc. used to take place every twelfth year at Haridvāra and Prayāga[78]. Others maintain that as special rites had to be performed by yogīs every twelfth year, they used to gather at Haridvāra, etc. to get facilities in their yogic practices[79]. Some others claim that this festival has to be traced back to Buddhists who convened their *dharmapariṣads* from time to time[80]. None of these traditions are supported by written records.

It has already been pointed out that the Kumbha assemblage at

Haridvāra has been there from the very beginning and was later on grafted on the age-old melas at Prayāga, Nāsik, and Ujjayinī. Hazra[81] thinks that the chapter of the *Nāradīya Purāṇa*, which contains the relevant verse referring to the particular conjunction of planets and zodiacal signs at Haridvāra, is a later interpolation. According to him, it may have been compiled in its surviving form as recently as the sixteenth century CE. The *Pratisargaparva* of the *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa*[82] mentions the celebration of a great festival (*mahotsava*), attended by kings and commoners, men and women, dressed according to their means, from different regions, at Gaṅgādvāra (Haridvāra) when Jupiter entered the zodiac of Aquarius in the month of Caitra. This provided an opportunity to the brāhmaṇa-poet Mitra Śarmā of Māyāvati (Haridvāra) and princess Citriṇī, the daughter of king Kāmasena of South India, to meet and fall in love with each other. The *Pratisargaparva* is particularly considered to be a late interpolation as is shown by references to medieval emperors Akbar and Nādir Shāh with their descendants and saints like Kabīr, Caitanya, Raidāsa and others; it even knows the British rule in India and narrates Calcutta and the parliament (*aṣṭa-kauśalya*). The episode of Mitra Śarmā-Citriṇī love affair in this section can not but be fabricated. The chapter in which it occurs is devoted to the account of births and lives of Nimbārka and Rāmānanda. But this tract of fourteen verses[83] within this chapter is not thematically connected with the subject-matter of the chapter and appears to be a totally isolated intervention. Reference to the Kumbha Mela at Haridvāra in this tract lodged in a chapter devoted to Nimbārka and Rāmānanda may be used to assign this intrusion a date reasonably later than the known dates of these two saints, i.e. thirteenth and fourteenth century CE respectively. Placing it two centuries still later will not be wide of mark. These Purāṇas, however, incorporate a tradition that is still earlier. Sarkar[84] has noted a very important traditional piece of history which possibly refers to the celebration of the Kumbhaparva at Haridvāra during the thirteenth century CE. According to it, Nāgā Samnyāsīs are reported to have won a decisive victory at Haridvāra over Bairāgīs, the Vaiṣṇava ascetics, in CE 1253. Bloody affrays between the Śaivite Nāgās and the Bairāgīs at the time of the Kumbha bath is a well-known fact of Indian religious history. It is recorded that in CE 1398 Timūr massacred a large number of devotees in Haridvāra[85]. Only on special occasions does Haridvāra attract large number of devotees. It was perhaps an occasion of the Kumbha Mela; for on reckoning, the year 1398 happens to be a year for that assemblage at Haridvāra[86].

In the traditional history of Caitanya's life, Caitanya is reported to have been present at the Kumbha Mela at Prayāga in CE 1514[87]. A reference to the Kumbha Mela at Haridvāra is found in the *Dabistān-i-Mazāhib,* the Parsee religious text of the seventeenth century CE. It mentions that a fighting took place between Mundies (Bairāgîs) and Samnyāsîs (Nāgās) at Haridvāra in the year 1050 Hizri/CE 1640. The Samnyāsîs became victorious and a number of Mundies were killed[88]. The *Gurucaritra* of Sarasvatî Gaṅgādhara, a book written in Marāṭhî about the end of the fifteenth century, records the celebration of the Siṁhastha Mela at Nāsik[89]. The *Bîtaka* of Lāladāsa (composed in the Saṁvat 1751 = CE 1694) says that Prāṇanātha, the founder of the Praṇāmî sect and the preceptor of the Bundela chief Chatrasāl (CE 1649-1731), participated in the Kumbha Mela of Haridvāra in Śaka 1600 (CE 1678), where he was crowned with the title of 'Vijayābhinanda-niṣkalaṅka - Buddha' in *śāstrārtha* (religious debate) after defeating the contestants belonging to Vaiṣṇavism, Daśanāmî order, and Ṣaḍdarśana (six systems of Indian philosophy).[90]

According to a copper-plate inscription in possession of Mahanta Rādhāmohanadāsajî of Nāsik, a great massacre of Bairāgîs took place at Nāsik at the time of Siṁhastha Mela in CE 1690[91]. The *Khulāṣat-ut-Tawārîkh,* composed in CE 1695, informs that every twelfth year when Jupiter enters the sign of Aquarius and the Sun is in Aries large number of people assemble at Haridvāra from remote distance for ritual bathing.[92] The celebration of a festival on the Godāvarî when Jupiter moves into Leo is also referred to in the same text.[93] Śaiva Samnyāsîs and Vaiṣṇava Bairāgîs are reported to have fought a pitched battle involving 1800 casualties on the occasion of the Kumbhaparva at Haridvāra in CE 1760 to decide the dispute about precedence at that place.[94]

Captain Thomas Hardwicke has informed that at the same mela in CE 1796 there was a regular fighting between the Śaiva and the Sikh ascetics and that five hundred men of the former were killed while the Sikhs lost only twenty.[95] On the question of precedence a quarrel occurred in CE 1906 between Śaiva Nirvāṇî on one side and

Vaiṣṇava Nirmohī and Digambarī on the other side at Prayāga. It necessitated the intervention of a squadron of cavalry[96].

On the basis of the evidences culled above, it may be surmised that the Kumbha Mela came to be organised sometime after the twelfth century CE, the conclusion also arrived at by Ghurye.[97] The tradition of holding this religious festival possibly crystallized during the heyday of the Bhakti movement, a movement of the socio-religious reforms set on foot by a series of Hindu saints and reformers. That the mela began to be held during the Bhakti movement is supported by the fact that it is the only mela that possesses a strictly catholic character which was the main ideal of the reformers of the Bhakti movement.

It has been suggested that primarily this festival belonged to the Nāgā Samnyāsīs and ascetics of different sects gradually came to be associated with it on account of its highly religious character.[98] All the organisational matters of the Nāgā ascetics, the election of office-bearers, the settlement of disputes in the Akhārās, and the initiation of ascetics into the Nāgā fold are all done in the Kumbha Mela. That the Nāgās are traditionally given priority in the Kumbha bath supports the argument that the organisation of the Nāgā Akhārās is intimately linked with the organisation of the Kumbha Mela. It should be pointed out that all the Akhārās of Nāgā Samnyāsīs claim their origin to be earlier than the establishment of Muslim rule in India. According to Sarkar[99], no reliable information about the origin and history of the different Akhārās before CE 1750 is available. He has, however, tried to reconstruct the chronology of the establishment of different Akhārās on the basis of a manuscript (*pothī*) maintained by the hereditary bards of the Nirvāṇī Akhārā[100]. Giri[101], who wrote a treatise on the history of the Daśanāmī Samnyāsī sect, maintains that "all the Akhārās must have been formed gradually during the period from the reign of Akbar to that of Aurangzeb". He, however, does not preclude the possibility of the existence of the Nāgās in wandering groups under their leaders before the reign of emperor Akbar (CE 1556-1605). The term Akhārā means an organisation of militant Nāgās and points to a certain period when Daśanāmī Samnyāsīs took to arms. This might have happened in the period when Hinduism was in peril during the Muslim rule. If the dates worked out by Sarkar for the establishment of the principal Akhārās be accepted, none of the Akhārās appears to be older than the twelfth century CE. This coincides with the probable period of the organisation of the Kumbha Mela and further supports the view that at first the Nāgā ascetics became interested or involved in this mela and gradually other sects joined it. That is why the mela is regarded as a congress of ascetics and monks.

## Social and Spatial View

It is difficult to ascertain the real historical cause for holding the Kumbha Melas at the places of pilgrimage. It seems that a number of monks and reformers introduced this assemblage of saints and householders at precise intervals at sacred places on the banks of the holy rivers to create an environment of mutual understanding amongst different religious sects and also to give an opportunity to householders to derive invaluable benefits from their association with the saintly personalities. Mammoth conferences were evidently being organised under the auspices of prominent religious organisations wherein philosophers, savants, and reformers participated to express their views for augmenting unity and fostering of different faiths. In fact, various orders of different Hindu faiths treat this fair as the occasion for duo-decennial assembly to discuss various spiritual and organisational problems. They congregate there mainly to profit by their contact with other sages and secondarily to take a hand in helping those pilgrims who are ripe for the message of light. In pre-industrial age when there was very poor facility of transport and communication, such periodical congregations at the sacred places were of utmost importance to give wide publicity to new ideas and inventions in a short period. The educative aspect of the mela postulates the significance of Jupiter in determining the occasion for its celebration; Jupiter symbolizes learning and knowledge.

One of the distinctive features of the Kumbha Mela is that on such occasion the corporate bodies of the various sects of ascetics attend it in state and march down the sacred water in grand procession on the important bathing days (Fig. 3a & 3b). The most practical sect affiliation is seen here; in the procession (*syāhī zulūsa*) ascetics have to move according to their established order. The question of precedence between the Śaiva Nāgās and the Vaiṣṇava Bairāgīs at the time of the Kumbha bath had been in the past an occasion not only for quarrels and strifes but also for regular battles. For, it was a matter of one's dignity, both worldly and spiritual, whether one reached the sacred water just at the appointed time of the sacred bath or whether one reached there some time before or after it. The British Government during the last quarter of the nineteenth century (i.e. 1879), after enquiring into the old time-honoured practice, laid down the following rules which are strictly enforced today. First the Śaiva Nāgā Samnyāsîs bathe, then the Vaiṣṇava Bairāgîs, next the Udāsî Nānaka Panthîs, and lastly the Nirmalā Sikh ascetics.[102] Among the Akhārās the following order is generally observed without breach : at Haridvāra, first the Nirañjanî Akhārā goes accompanied by the Jūnā, Āvāhana and Ānanda Akhārās. Next goes the Nirvāṇî Akhārā accompanied by Aṭala. At Prayāga, the Nirvāṇî Akhārā accompanied by Aṭala goes first, then Nirañjanî followed by Jūnā, Āvāhana and Ānanda. At Nāsik, the Jūnā Akhārā goes first, and the Nirvāṇî and Nirañjanî Akhārās follow it. At Ujjayinî, all the Akhārās go in a line.[103] This arrangement was made to avoid bloody struggles among the Akhārās.

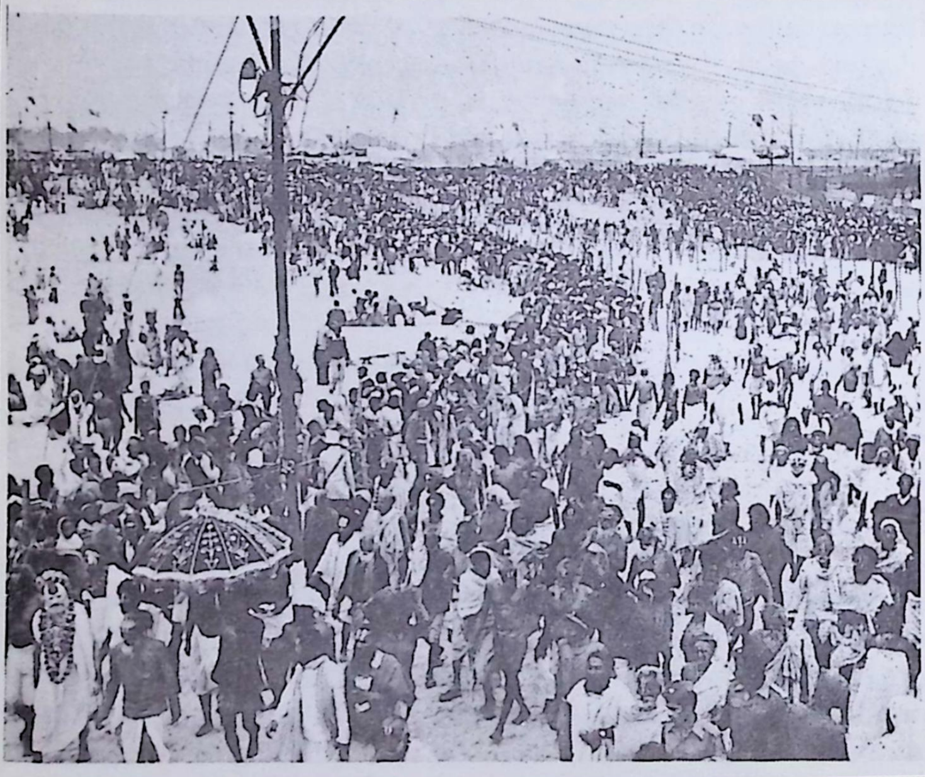

Fig. 3a : Procession of Sādhus marching for bath to Saṅgama at Prayāga, 1977

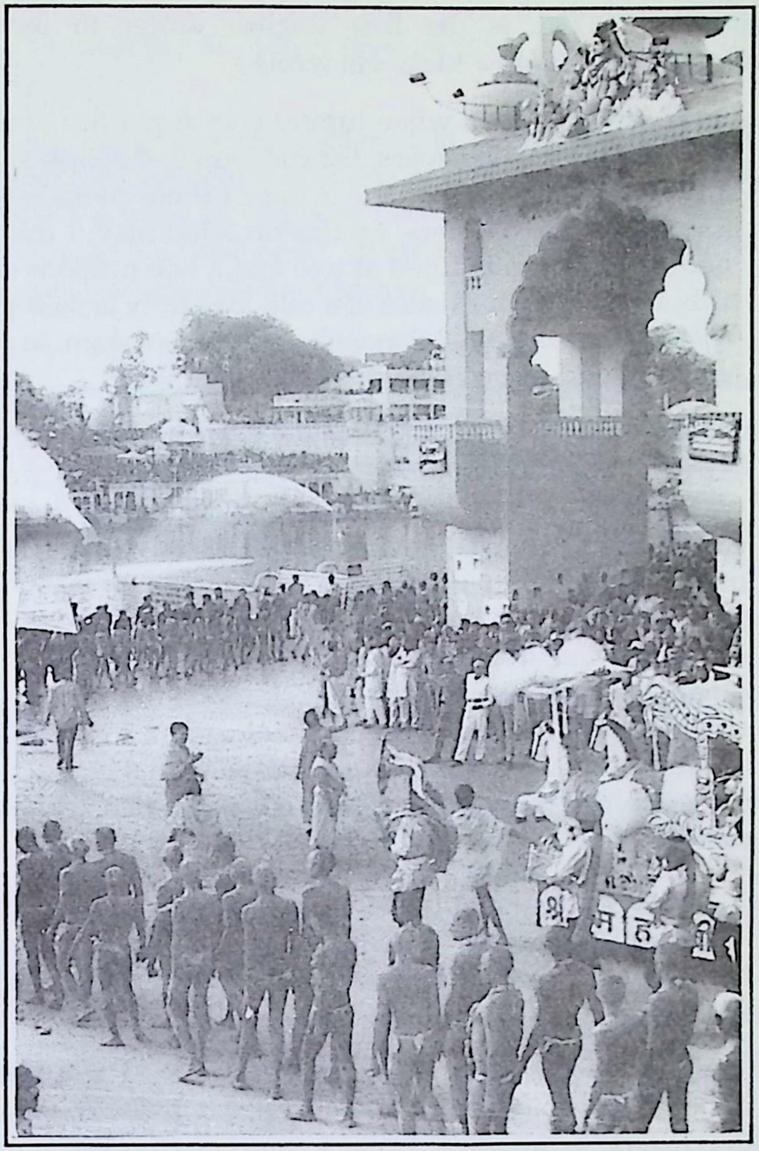

Fig.3b : Procession of Nāgā Samnyāsīs reaching Rāmaghāṭa at Ujjayinī, 1992

The mela also records a huge mass of visitors from the West. Although they rarely understood what it all meant, they described what they saw with vivid visual detail. Their writings are interesting and important because they provide the only descriptive accounts of the Kumbha Melā in the past centuries. Captain Thomas Hardwicke, who paid a visit to Haridvāra during the mela on April 8 (the day of

Meṣasaṅkrānti), 1796, is the first English writer to record his impression of the Kumbha Mela. He wrote :

> "But every twelfth year, when Jupiter is in Aquarius, at the time of the Sun's entering Aries, the concourse of people is greatly augmented. The present one is one of those periods, and the multitude collected here, on this occasion may, I think, with moderation, be computed at two and a half millions of souls. Although the performance of a religious duty is their primary object, yet, many avail themselves of the occasion, to transact business, and carry on an extensive commerce. ...
>
> The most troublesome guests were the Goosseyns (Gosāins), who being the first here in point of numbers and power, thought it warrantable to take more freedom than others did... In the early part of the mela, this sect of fakeers erected the standard of superiority, and proclaimed themselves regulators of the police ... They published an edict, prohibiting all other tribes from entering the place with their swords or arms of any other description ... The Byraagees (Bairāgīs), who were the next powerful sect, gave up the point, and next followed their example. Thus, the Goosseyns paraded with their swords and shields, while every other tribe carried only bamboos through the fair ...
>
> The Goosseyns maintained an uncontested authority till the arrival of about 12 or 14,000 Seek (Sikh) horsemen, with their families etc., who encamped on the plains about Jualalpore (Jwālāpur) ...
>
> All was pretty quiet during the few remaining days of bathing; but on the morning of the 10th of April (which day concluded the mela), ... about 8 O'clock in the morning the Seeks assembled in force and proceeded to the different watering places, where they attacked with swords, spears and fire-arms, every tribe of fakeers that came in their way. These people made some resistance, but being on foot, and few, if any, having fire- arms, the contest was unequal and the Seeks who were all mounted, drove the Sannyassees (Samnyāsīs), Byraagees, Goosseyns, Naagees (Nāgās), etc., before them, with irresistible fury ... and having slaughtered a great

> number, pursued the remainder, until, by flight to the hills, or by swimming the river, they escaped the revenge of their pursuers.
>
> Accounts agree that the fakeers lost about five hundred men killed, among whom was one of their mehunts (*mahantas*) or priests named Maunpoore (Mānpurî), and they had many wounded : of the Seeks about twenty were killed, but the number of wounded not known".[104]

Capt. F. V. Raper, who was deputed by the Government of Bengal to survey the course of the Gaṅgā river upto its fountain, arrived on the first of April 1808 at Haridvāra, and encamped at the village of Kanakhala on the west bank of the Gaṅgā at the distance of about two miles from the (Kumbha) fair, and on the left of the detachment which had been assembled for the purpose of maintaining tranquility on that occasion. He has left a graphic description of the mela, it is thus quoted :

> "The town of Haridwāra is very inconsiderable in itself, having only one street about 15 feet in breadth, and one furlong and a half in length ...
>
> ... At the commencement of the hot weather, an annual pilgrimage is enjoined, and attended by people from all parts of Hindustan and the Dekhin (Deccan), for the purpose of making their ablutions in the holy stream (Gaṅgā). The bathing commences in the month of Chaitra, when the Sun is in Mîna or Pisces, and concludes on the day it enters Mesha or Aries, agreeably to the solar computation of the Hindus, and corresponding with the 10th April, on which day the Sun has actually advanced 20° in that sign. Every twelfth year is celebrated with greater rejoicings, and is called the Kumbha Mela, so denoted from the planet Jupiter being then in the sign of Aquarius. Whether this sign be symbolical of the purpose for which they meet, or whether the injunction be arbitrary or accidental, is not ascertained, but a pilgrimage at these duodecennial periods is considered the most fortunate and efficacious. The present was one of those periods; being just twelve years since the visit of Col. Hardwicke to the fair, when the contentions, which took place between the different

> sects of religious mendicants, were attended with considerable bloodshed ... To prevent a repetition of such outrages, the detachment assembled for the preservation of peace was this year of greater strength than usual ... numbers are led hither as much from commercial as holy motives, and independent of the merchandise brought by the merchants from the Punjab, Kabul, Kashmir and other places, most of the pilgrims supply themselves with some articles, the produce or manufacture of the country from which they came, for which they are certain of an advantageous sale; ... The principal articles, brought hither for sale, are horses, mules, camels, a species of tobacco (called *caccar*), antimony, asafoetida, dried fruits, such as apricots, figs, prunes, raisins, almonds, pistachio nuts and pomegranates from Kabul, Kandahar, Multan and the Punjab; shawls, *dūtas, pattūs* from Kashmir and Amritsar; *chīrās* (spotted turbans), looking-glasses, toys, with various manufactures in brass and ivory from Jayapura; shields from Rohilkhand, Lakhnau and Silhet; bows and arrows from Multan and the Doab; rock salt from Lahore; baftas and piece goods from Rahn, a large city in the Punjab. The country of Marwar also supplies a great number of camels, and a species of flannel called *loi*. From the Company's provinces are brought *kharua*, muslins, *mashrū* (sarcenet), cocoa-nuts and woollen clothes.
>
> The northern merchants, who visit the fair, travel in large parties called *kafilahs;* and the cattle brought for sale are used also for the conveyance of merchandise. Those who have no investments of shawls or dried fruits, accommodate pilgrims and other travellers from whom they receive more than sufficient to defray the expenses of the animals on the road. ...
>
> ... Those who come merely for the purpose of bathing, arrive in the morning; and after performing their ablutions, depart in the evening, or on the following day; by which means a constant successon of strangers is kept up; occasioning one of the most busy scenes that can be well conceived. To calculate the probable amount of such multitudes would be impossible, and it would be equally vain to hazard a conjecture; but if we estimate the number at

two millions of souls, we shall probably fall short rather than exceed the reality. During the Maharata (Marāṭhā) Government, there were some grounds on which the calculation might have been made; as a kind of poll-tax was levied on those who came to the fair; and very heavy duties on cattle and merchandise; but this arbitrary system is now abolished, and all castes and descriptions of people have free ingress and egress, without impost or molestation.

To subsist such hosts of people would, one might suppose, almost create a famine; but the bazar exhibited no appearance of scarcity, and the flour sold in our camp at the rate of twenty four or twenty five *sers* for the rupee. The ephemeral visitors, in general, bring their own provisions; and some thousands of carts are employed in converging grain to the fair. These supplies are drawn chiefly from the Doab ...

Besides the articles above mentioned, we were much surprised to see some Venetian and Dutch coins, and some toys of European manufacture, exposed for sale in the market. ...

The horses and cattle are dispersed, indiscriminately, all over the fair, which is held in the bed of the river, at this season nearly dry. After the first of April, the influx of people is so great that few vacant spots are to be found in the vicinity of the market; and encroachments are made on the neighbouring mountain; huts and temporary habitations are observed to rise in every direction; and from a barren deserted bed of sand, the whole surface is seen in motion. It is curious to observe the different cast of countenance, of the various tribes who are here assembled; and the contrast of character would furnish an excellent subject for the pencil of an Hogarth.

The most conspicuous personages are the fakirs, of whom there are several sects; but the principal ones are the Gosāins or Sannyāsîs, the Bairāgîs, the Jogîs and the Udāsîs. The four sects are again subdivided and branch out into a great variety; the different shades and discriminations of which it is difficult to make out or comprehend. The most numerous are the Gosāins, who during the Maharata Government, were sufficiently powerful to dispute the authority at the place; and

> not only collected the duties on their own account; but regulated the police during the fair. This assumption was, of course, productive of many serious disputes, which were decided by the sword : but the Gosāins were generally victorious, and maintained the sovereignty for many years. The next powerful sect was the Bairāgī, but, from the year 1760, till the Company got possession of the Doab, this caste was debarred from the pilgrimage. ... In the Kumbha Mela of that year, they both happened to meet at Haridwāra. ... On the Pūrbī or last day of bathing, the two parties met near Kanakhala, and after a long and bloody contest, victory declared in favour of the Gosāins. It is said that eighteen thousand Bairāgīs were left dead on the field. Since that time the Gosāins have claimed the pre-eminence, and appear to have exercised their authority in a manner little expressive of meekness or toleration. Although their despotic sway is over, they still occupy the best situations at the fair. ...
>
> No particular ceremony is observed at the bathing, which consists entirely in the simple immersion. Those who are rigidly pious, or may have any apprehension in going into the water, are introduced by a couple of Brāhmens (brāhmaṇas); who, having dipped the penitent in the holy stream, reconduct him to the shore. Few, however, require this assistance; and, as the water is not above four feet deep, the women even plunge in without hesitation, and both sexes intermix indiscriminately. After the ablution is performed, the men whose fathers are dead, and widows, undergo the operation of tonsure.
>
> Besides the Har-ka-Pairī, there are several other places of religious worship in the neighbourhood. ..."[105]

The Kumbha Mela which was held in 1882 at Prayāga is thus described by T. Benson, I.C.S., in his report :

> "To each corporation (Akhārā) of religious ascetics was assigned a space of ground, within which it erected a temporary village or town for the accommodation of its members, in the centre of which moved the standard of the guild on a lofty flag-staff. These encampments were orderly and well laid out,

> and of a comfortable description ... The various camps formed were : Nirvāṇī Nāgā Gosāins, Nirañjanī with whom were associated Jūnā, Bairāgīs, Choṭā Akhārā Pancāyatī Udāsī Nānakạ Panthīs, Barā Akhārā Pancāyatī with Bandhuā Akhārā (Sikhs), and Nirmalā Sikhs with the Brindāvanī.
>
> On the three great days (*makara-saṅkrānti, amāvāsyā,* and *basantapañcamī*) each of the six sects went separately down to bathe in formal procession, the most noticeable feature being the body of naked faquirs closing the procession of each of the first two sects (the Nirvāṇī and the Nirañjanī) and the gorgeous silken banners and elephant trappings of the wealthier guilds".[106]

A graphic description of the Kumbha Mela of 1906 at Prayāga is given by Sidney Low, which is quoted below :

> "There were said to be two millions at the (Kumbha) Mela during one of the great processional days on which I visited it; and to the casual spectator, surveying to immense encampment and the morning crowds, the estimate did not seem exaggerated. The Camp, indeed, should not be called by that name. It is a town—a temporary town, it is true; but while it lasts it is one of the great cities of the world, more populous than Peking or Vienna, with as many inhabitants as Liverpool, Manchester and Glasgow rolled into one.
>
> The Kumbha Mela is an affair of the priests and the ascetics. They keep it going mainly for their own benefit and in essentials it probably does not differ greatly from what it was three centuries ago. The Government does not interfere with the religious ceremonies. Hinduism even in its ridiculous and offensive manifestations, is given a free hand.
>
> The various sects and Akhārās are active rivals, and some care has to be taken that they do not come into collision during the Allahabad Mela. The most turbulent are the Bairāgīs ... who are always a source of anxiety to the police officials during the mela; for they are noisy and aggressive, and, unlike the other bodies, they are not under the regular control of their *mahantas* (chiefs of the Order). All the Akhārās are encamped

> upon the left bank of the Ganges, with the Bairāgīs separated by a broad road and a fence from the others.
>
> From bank to bank two temporary bridges of boats are laid during the mela. On the Allahabad side is the camp of the pilgrims. It is a town of many streets. The avenues and cross-roads are laid out by the Government, which also builds huts of plaited straw, and allow them to be occupied at a very low rent by the visitors. A few hundred thousands are lodged in this way. Others make tiny sheds for themselves of logs and brushwood, or put up little shelters of canvas, or are content with the bare ground, and it may be an umbrella.
>
> To go his rounds at the fair is an interesting experience. Strange scenes and figures are met at every turn. There is a separate enclosure for the barbers, a whole village of them, for no less than 2800 of these useful persons are needed to perform the offices of the toilet for the pilgrim. The main street of the Camp is a seething bazaar, where traders and merchants of all kinds have set up shops. Brass pots and pans, clothing provisions, toys, jewellery, native shoes and Austrian kidboots, books, perfumes, cheap haberdashery, sewing machines, and numberless other things, are on sale ... There are numerous shows and performances.
>
> Religion, trade and amusement go hand in hand everywhere. The ground is dotted with tiny shrines and make shift temples ... Dust-strewn faquirs sit under big umbrellas, wrapped in meditation, but with an ear of the clinking of coppers in the begging bowl beside them. Some of them rest immovable, hour after hour, on wooden bedsheets, studded with iron nails, the points upwards. Others exhibit hideous deformities."[107]

Mark Tully, the BBC bureau chief in Delhi, visited the mela of 1989 at Prayāga, which was considered to be the most important Kumbha Mela for 144 years because of the particularly auspicious positions of stars and planets. He has penned down his observations on the main bath day thus :

> "In spite of the fear of imaginary calamities, in spite of all kinds of rumours, people have flocked from the north, the south,

the east and the west, by train, bus, taxi, tractor and on foot to the sacred soil of Prayag to take a holy bath in the Sangam on the occasion of Mauni Amavasya ...

A river of humanity was flowing towards the Sangam. All traffic had been banned. Village women anxiously held each other's saris so that they didn't get separated. Men carried sacks, suitcases and even tin trunks on their heads - they contained pots and pans and everything else needed by the self-sufficient camper. The pilgrims walked in silence, looking straight ahead. There was no panic, no pushing - just a slow, steady progress. A woman bent double with age was being led by her daughter. They both wore their saris tied between their legs, in the fashion of the west coast. There was a group of hawk-nosed men with the bright turbans of the desert state of Rajasthan tied loosely round their heads. There were barefoot girls from the tribes of central India with thick silver anklets. There were pilgrims from the Himalayas too - Nepalis with checked caps, and women from the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, their hair tied in scarves. There were Bengalis from the east, the men wearing flowing dhotis and embroidered shawls. Only the south of India seemed to be thinly represented. Most of the pilgrims had come in groups from their villages. The occasional girl dressed in jeans or man in terry cotton trousers stood out, even in that crowd.

All the pilgrims had already walked several miles from the bus stands and railway stations. Some were resting before starting on the last stage of their journey, the walk over the embankment into the mela proper. A wife was massaging the thin, vein-bound legs of her husband. An old man in a torn army jumper was sitting peacefully under a bridge. He had been a soldier with the raj and had taken sannyas thirty-five years before. He couldn't remember the name of his regiment.

There was no question of tents for all these pilgrims, most of them just squatted wherever they could. By evening, the mela was shrouded in the smoke of thousands of cow-dung cooking-fires, which stung my eyes and brought back memories of many evenings spent in Indian villages.

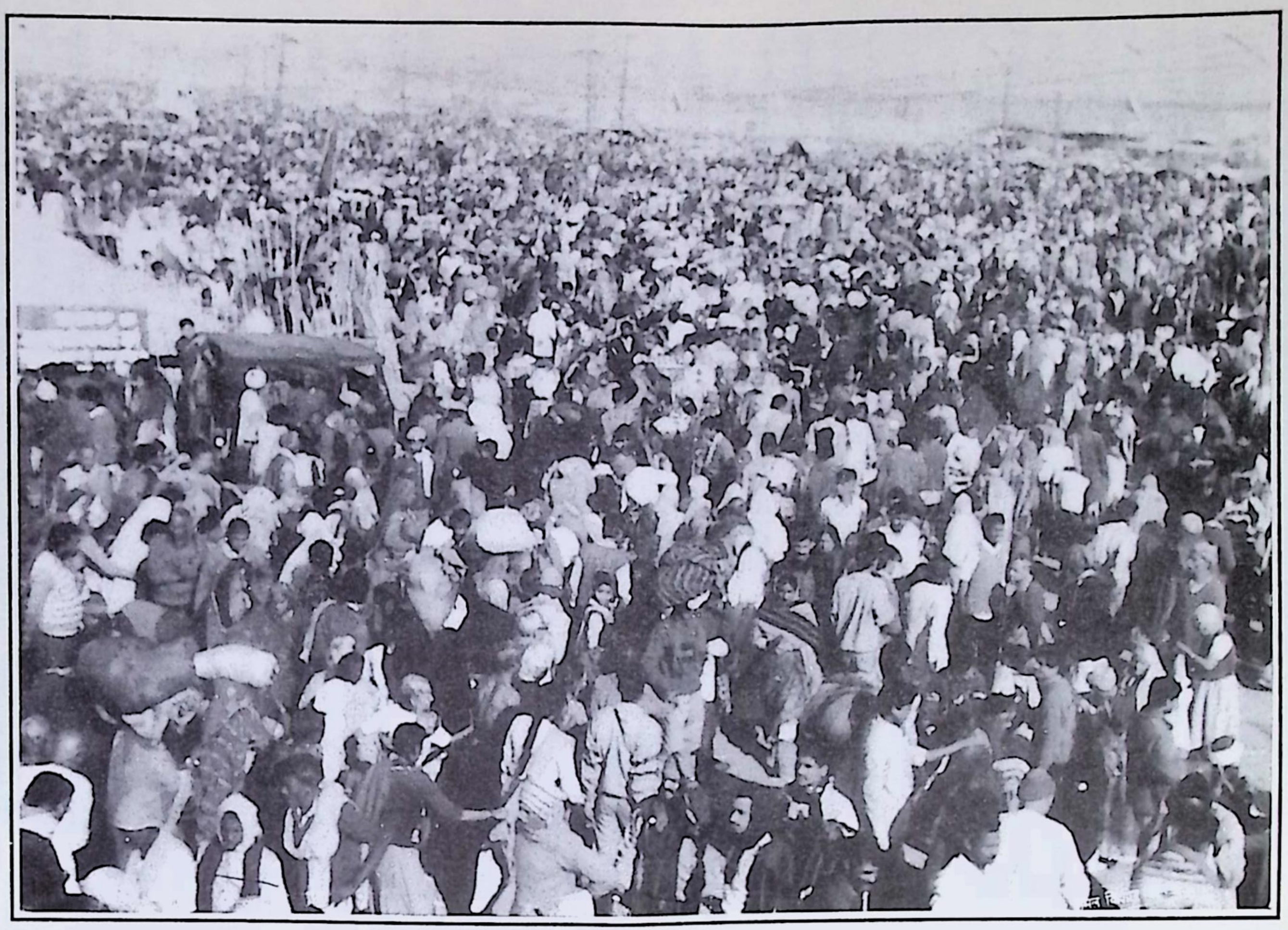

Fig. 4 : Crowd on the main Kumbha bathing day at Prayāga, 1989

> Commercial and religious activity in the mela had reached fever pitch. The roads were lined with stalls selling piles of brightly coloured powder for marking foreheads and partings, sacred threads, cassettes of the words of the sadhus and their music too. A man was selling magic rings. The board beside his stall read, 'Do you have bad health? To preserve yourself from all these worries, wear this ring and get the benefit.' Next door a stall was offering a more orthodox means of warding off evil: strings of brown rudraksha beads offering the protection of Lord Shiva. Empty whiskey bottles were on sale for two rupees, to carry away the holy water of the Sangam. For the children there were spirographs and ingenious plastic toys which were catapulted into the air and spun down to earth like helicopters. All sorts of vegetarian food was available, and barbers were doing a brisk business shaving pilgrims' heads.
>
> The crowds filed slowly past the stalls, stared through the gates of the akharas, and filled the pavilions of the holy men whose fairground lights flashed and loudspeakers bellowed. The Ram and Krishnalilas - were particularly popular. A vast blue clay statue of Shiva dominated one bank of the Ganges. Some pilgrims squatted quietly by the river performing puja with small clay saucers full of burning ghi. They tried to float them down the Ganges, but the river was so low that most got stuck in the mud, shining in the dark water like stars in a night sky. Under one pontoon bridge, night-herons stood silent and still, oblivious of the cacophony and the crowds, their heads jutting forward, waiting to pounce on their prey"[108].

The Kumbha Mela occurs at Prayāga and Haridvāra in its gorgeous form and in a minor form at two other sites. On certain days of the mela, Prayāga is the scene of what is almost certainly the greatest assemblage of people gathered together in a confined space for a single purpose anywhere on earth. It is a sight to see. On 3rd February 1954, during the Kumbha Mela, it was estimated that six million people were present[109] in an area of 1300 acres. The crowd was divided in 1965-66 due to the emergence of a difference among astrologers. In 1965 more than 4 million pilgrims were reported there. The Kumbha Mela of 1977 was advertised as a rare event, participation in which could earn untold religious merits. So it attracted about thirteen million people.[110] More than 15 million souls are reported to have participated in the Kumbha Mela of 1989 (Fig.4). Haridvāra represents the 'supra-regional' level, attracting pilgrims from all over northern India from Kashmir to Bengal.[111] There were two and a half million people competing for the sacred bath in 1962, it is reported. In 1974 the mela is said to have attracted four million bathers on April 13, the principal bathing day.[112] Elaborate arrangements were made to meet the rush of seven million persons in 1986[113], which increased to about ten millions in 1998, the last Kumbha Mela of the century (Fig. 5). The Kumbha Mela at Ujjayinī ranks third in importance, attracting pilgrims mostly from central India. On 13th May, 1957, 25,000 ascetics belonging to various orders took a dip in the holy waters of the Śiprā at the crack of dawn, and about three hundred thousand lay people followed their example.[114]

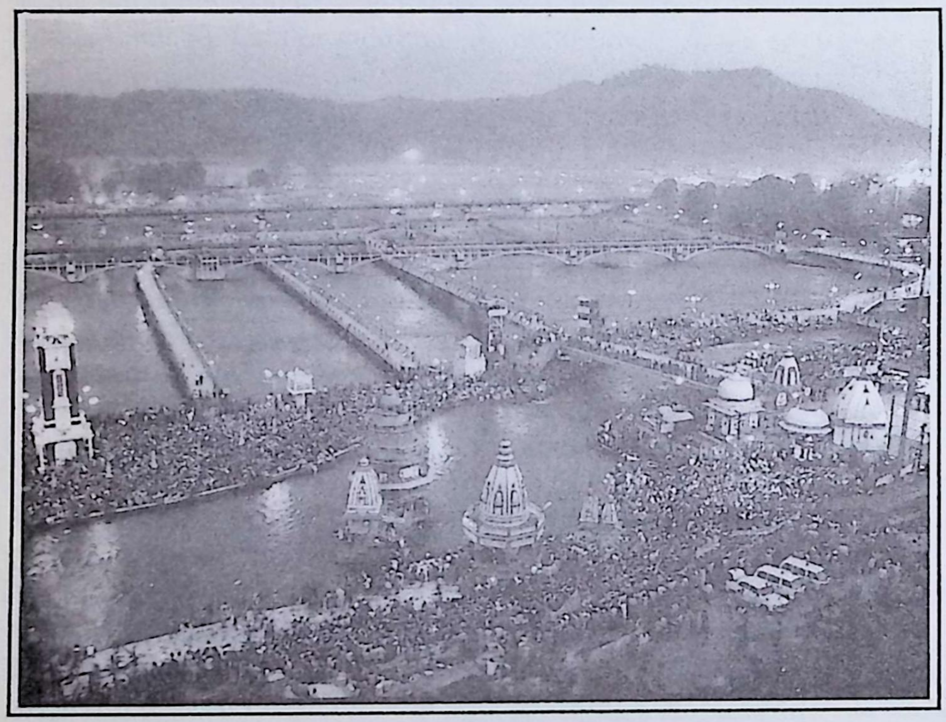

Fig. 5 : Crowd on the main Kumbha bathing day
at Haridvāra, 1998

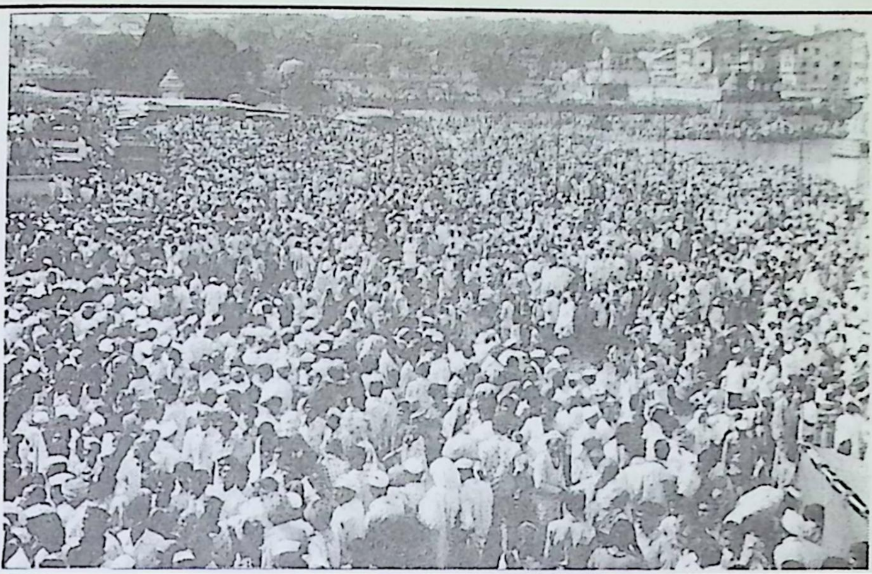

Fig. 6 : Crowd on the main Kumbha bathing day at Nāsik, 1980

In 1968 about twenty lakh people bathed in the sacred waters on the Vaiśākha *pūrṇimā* (12th May), and in 1980 three million persons were estimated to be present there in an area of 535 hectares,[115] while reportedly 4 million devouts benefitted from the ritual bath in the Kumbha Mela of 1992. The event at Nāsik is somewhat localized; only Nāgās, a few saffron-clad sādhus and people from Mahārāstra and Gujarāta attend it (Fig. 6). The mela administrators labour at lengths to explain how they estimated the crowds. They tally the rail tickets, bus tickets, density of the walking crowds, etc. But perhaps it is not possible to count even the nearest million. Mark Tully has rightly quipped, "The Kumbha Mela is billed as the biggest religious festival in the world, but no one knows exactly how big it is."[116]

The Kumbha Mela attracted a record gathering but also had its share of unpleasant incidents. The desire to bathe at the propitious moment and at the sanctified bathing spot has led great loss of life in times and again. In 1820 at Haridvāra, in consequence of a desperate rush made by the infatuated crowd, 430 persons were crushed to death, including several sepoys stationed there as guards.[117] In 1950, on the main bathing day, elaborate arrangements were made there but 22 persons lost their lives.[118] When panic broke out among the

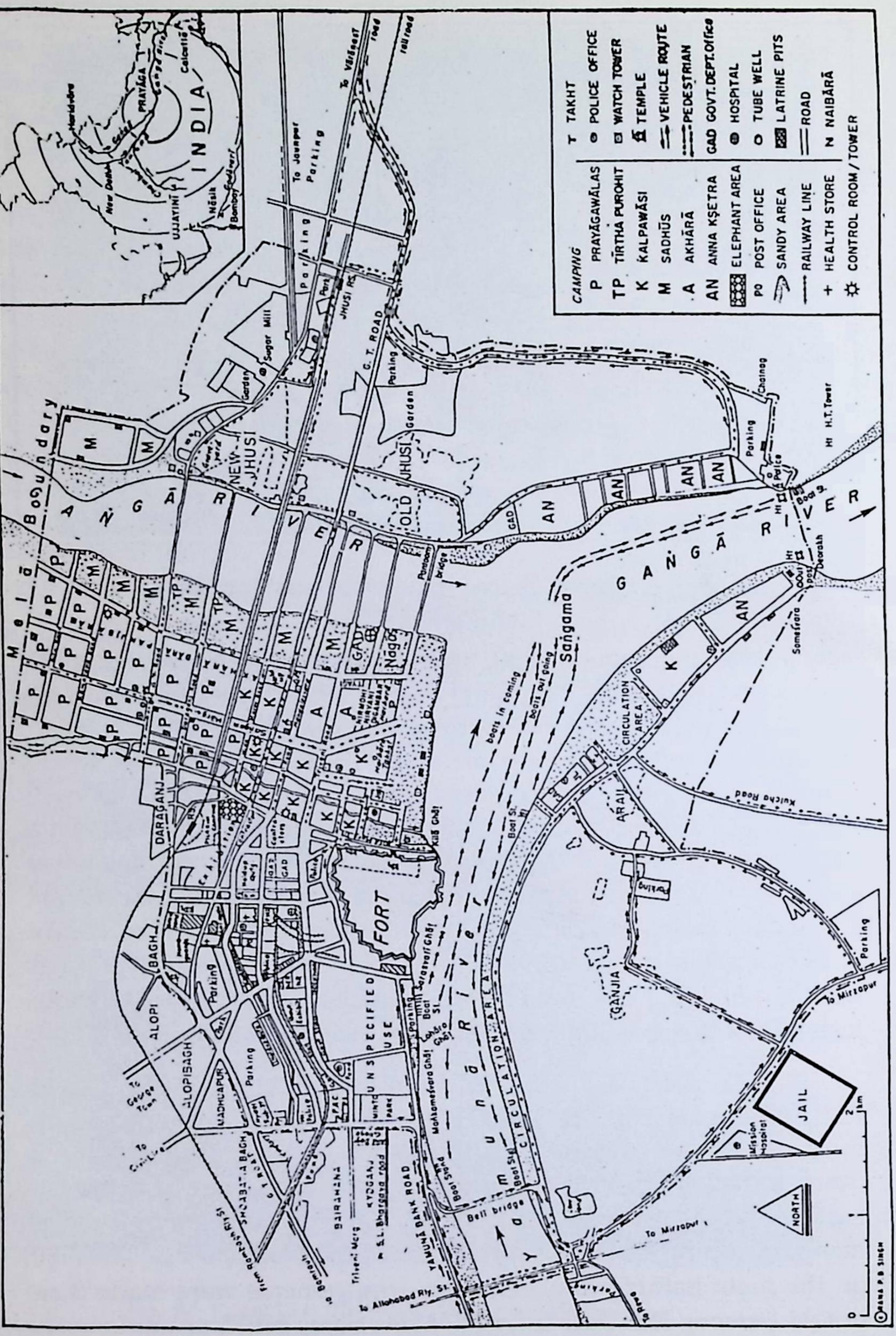
CAMPING
P PRAYĀGAWĀLAS
TP TĪRTHA PUROHIT
K KALPAWĀSI
M SADHŪS
A AKHĀRĀ
AN ANNA KṢETRA
ELEPHANT AREA
PO POST OFFICE
SANDY AREA
RAILWAY LINE
+ HEALTH STORE
CONTROL ROOM/TOWER
T TAKHT
POLICE OFFICE
WATCH TOWER
TEMPLE
VEHICLE ROUTE
PEDESTRIAN
GAD GOVT. DEPT. Office
HOSPITAL
TUBE WELL
LATRINE PITS
ROAD
N NAIBĀRĀ
INDIA
PRAYĀGA
Haridvāra
New Delhi
UJJAYINĪ
Nāsik
Bombay
Calcutta
Melā Boundary
GAṄGĀ RIVER
YAMUNĀ RIVER
NEW JHUSI
OLD JHUSI
G. T. ROAD
JHUSI Rd.
Sugar Mill
Garden
Parking
To Jaunpur
To Vārānasī
rail road
Pontoon bridge
Saṅgama
boats in coming
boats out going
CIRCULATION AREA
ARAIL
GANJIA
Kutcha Road
Someśvara
Devarakh
Chatnag
H.T. Tower
To Mirzapur
Mission Hospital
JAIL
NORTH
km
0
2
FORT
Kilā Ghāṭ
DARAGANJ
BAGH
ALOPI
ALOPIBAGH
MADHOAPUR
UNSPECIFIED USE
Parking
To George Town
To Civil Lines
From Rambagh Rly. St.
To Allahabad Rly. St.
YAMUNĀ BANK ROAD
Bell bridge
Boat St.
Boat Stand
To Rewa
Nāgo
RANA P.B. SINGH

Fig. 7 : Spatial Plan of Kumbha Mela at Prayāga, 1989

crowds due to the confusion created during the procession of ascetics about three hundred pilgrims were trampled into the muddy ground just below the bund at Prayāga in 1954.[119] The Haridvāra Kumbha Mela of 1986 was also marked with such a sad stampede; 40 persons were killed and more than one hundred were injured[120]. The number of the dead and injured according to popular calculation was, however, above the limit of official figures.

Crowds at the Kumbha Mela nowadays are bigger than in the past; facilities of transport and explosion of population make the participation more numerous. The management of the mela is not an easy task. Past experiences have opened the eyes of the Government. Problems of lodging, food, transport, sanitation, etc. are faced by the local administration. Private bodies and voluntary organisations rise to the occasion to render all possible help to the pilgrims. The Kumbha Mela of 1977 at Prayāga was planned on a lavish scale on an area of 2665 acres of the sandy tract. Elaborate arrangements were made for the regulation of traffic and for bathing at the confluence which was luckily duplicated by the river Gaṅgā flowing into two streams joining the Yamunā some distance apart. The mela ground had the privileges of a modern town. Temporary hospitals, railways booking offices, post and telegraph offices, fire brigade stations, and enquiry offices were set up for the use of the general public. Numerous tents and hutments for providing lodging for pilgrims and ascetics were erected on the grid pattern in the mela area. Eight temporary bridges on the Gaṅgā and one on the Yamunā for easy communication were constructed, loudspeakers were installed at different corners and barricades were erected to facilitate one way traffic. Special trains were run and roadways buses and private vehicles operated from all directions. Health facilities were appropriate; and cholera inoculation (now discarded) was made compulsory. The layout of 1989 mela (Fig. 7) was based on that of 1977. Two more pontoon bridges on the Gaṅgā were constructed for smooth circulation of pilgrims in the mela area. Due to the expected increase in number of visiting devotees, it was spread over an area of 3500 acres of land, which was divided into nine sectors for administrative purposes.

Similar arrangements were made by the administrative machinery to provide all possible facilities to pilgrims during the

Kumbha Mela of 1986 at Haridvāra. The area of Kumbha Mela was spread over 130 square kilometres embracing parts of Sahāranpur, Bijnor, Dehrādūn, Paurî Garhwāl and Tehrî Garhwāl districts. The mela region was divided into 20 sectors; and a sector Magistrate, a Deputy Superintendent of Police, and a Regional Health Officer/Officer- in-charge Medical Services were posted in each sector. 21 Police stations and 42 police posts were set up to keep traffic and law and order situation under control. Safety zones were demarcated by iron chains at the bathing ghāṭas. Seventeen temporary bridges had been constructed at different points to facilitate the easy movement of traffic. Continuous power and water supply had also been ensured in the region. Hospitals and fair price shops were opened with a view to providing medical facilities and essential commodities to the pilgrims. The mela administration took all measures to provide lodging and transport facilities to pilgrims.[121]

The planning of the Kumbha Mela of 1998 at Haridvāra was roughly modelled on that of 1986. The mela area was divided into 31 administrative sectors. Keeping in view the past experiences, the area in and around Hari kî Pairî was kept free from any camping/built up area. 3.5 km bathing ghāṭas on either side of the Hari kî Pairî were built/extended. Thus, more bathing area was available to the devotees. Modern security systems were used for providing security cover to the pilgrims. Besides repair of old ghāṭas and canal roads, 3 permanent concrete bridges, 7 temporary steel bridges, 22 temporary balliorate bridges and two pontoon bridges on the Gaṅgā were constructed. Emphasis was laid on the creation of permanent construction assets, which are of use to the public even when the mela is over. Mela area was kept fly-free and medical facilities of the high standard were provided. Ration shops in each sector provided kerosene oil, foodgrains and other essential commodities at fixed prices to the pilgrims. 155 milk booths supplied milk in the mela area. The Gaṅgā Pollution Control Units managed to keep the river free from pollution. Computer was introduced in the mela for the first time; the documentation and monitoring of projects were done with the help of computers.

The Kumbha Mela of 2001 at Prayāga is likely to grow bigger for being the first mela of the millennium; and therefore the mela area has been increased 20% over the last Kumbha area, divided into 12 administrative sectors. Fifteen bridges, including one on the Yamunā and the other on the conjoint stream, will be constructed for coping with the traffic hazards. The course of the Gaṅgā below the bund is following the pattern noticed in the 1954 Kumbha Mela; therefore a major portion of the mela is being planned to be set up across the river. The bund side space will be utilised for bathing and circulating area. The course of the Gaṅgā below the bund is still unpredictable. The mela administration is trying its best for making the bathing ghāṭas and the circulating area such as to ensure smooth flow of pilgrims' traffic. The Government has approved the mela budget of Rs. 120 crores and the amount has been passed on to various departments as per their project projections. 28 police stations, and 35 police sub-stations manned by 16,000 police personnel; besides 40 company of PAC, 3,000 homeguards and 400 chowkidars will be deployed to keep strict surveillance in the mela. Trains will be available after every 15 minutes to minimize rush of passengers during the important bathing days. The U. P. State Road Transport Corporation has decided to run 3300 additional buses during the mela period, while the normal and regular bus services would not be affected. 3,000 telephone connections will be provided and 250 PCOs will be installed in the mela area. 104 PDS shops will provide essential commodities to the pilgrims at fixed rates. 35,000 litres of milk will be supplied daily through 100 milk booths in the mela. It will be the first hi-tech mela enabling pilgrims to have its glimpse on big screens installed in a radius of 20 km from the Saṅgama point to help incoming pilgrims to plan their entry into the Kumbha colony. Inside the mela area too big screens will be there on strategic points showing the fair-highlights to enable devotees to visit the choicest camps, discourse pāṇḍālas and camps of saints and seers camping in the mela. Information about the lost and found people will also be displayed on the screens to enable their relatives reach the points for doing the needful. Star hotels have approached the mela administration for making arrangements of tent colony for foreign tourists. Life and property in the Kumbha colony is being insured by the Life Insurance Corporation of India. This is for the first time that such a coverage to the life of pilgrims is being given in any fair across the country so far.

## Concluding Remarks

The Kumbha Mela, as the greatest religious fair and the highest state of water symbolism, represents the microcosm of Indian civilization and also the totality of Indian cultural traditions. As an organic emergence of sacred space and sacred time, this mela shows the best in the socio-religious traditions of the country and brings to the people those noble and enlightening thoughts that foster cultural integration through the psycho-historical way of acceptance of a tradition from generation to generation. The mela is based upon the Indian concept of ritual bath, so it remains subjugated to the dominating influence of a ritual pattern, representing life as water-flow in a sense of existence and continuity what is referred as "lifeflow". This idea reveals the quest to understand "human creativity" as water is the basic essential need for life, this quest being symbolically transformed into India's greatest "water ritual" referring to the sensitivity about life as a whole and the motivation to explore its invisibility as it forms the whole of nature, cosmos and humanity-ultimately perceived as holy.[122] According to Bhardwaj[123], "purification by bathing, one of the most universal religious practices in Hinduism, finds its full expression at the super climatic times of the Kumbha Melas when the reactualization of a life-giving cosmic event occurs. Pilgrimage is made here to earn merits and experience sanctity rather than to pray for material gains". Places associated with sacred waters assume high sanctity on the occasion of Kumbhaparva and are mostly 'transsectarian'.

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58. TSSP, 130. 35.

59. BP, 152. 38.

60. Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

61. तदर्धे वर्षमाने च कुम्भोर्ध्वं सार्धपञ्चकम् /
ऊर्धकुम्भं विजानीयात् फलार्धं मोक्षदायकम् //
Pt. Umarao Pandey kindly drew my attention to this *s'loka*. His claim that it belongs to the *Śaktiyāmala Tantra* could not be varified due to the non-availability of any manuscript of the Tantric text.

62. देवानां द्वादशाहोभिर्मर्त्यैर्द्वादशवत्सरैः ।
जायन्ते कुम्भपर्वाणि तथा द्वादशसंख्यया // KM, 21; KN, 6.

63. DTKN, 23.

64. *Ibid*, 25.

65. Kane, *op. cit.*, Vol. V(i), pp. 658, 661.

66. Gupta, S. L., "The Number Twelve and the Four Kumbha Mela Sites", *India Cultures Quartely*, Vol. 24(3), 1967, p. 51.

67. Mbh, III. 134. 18.

68. *Agni Purāṇa* (ed. Baladeva Upadhyaya, Varanasi : Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1966), 59. 38-48.

69. *Ibid.*, 201. 9-12.

70. *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* quoted by Kane, *op. cit.*, Vol. IV, p. 51.

71. Spellman, John, W., 'The Symbolic Significance of the number twelve in Ancient India', *Journal of Asian Studies*, p. 79.

72. Ghurye, G. S., *Indian Sadhus* (Bombay : Popular Prakashan, 1953, second edn. 1964), p. 222.

73. Beal, S. *Buddhist Records of the Western World* (Delhi : Bharatiya Publishing House, repr. 1980), pp. 186-187; Watters, T., *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India* (Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1961, first Indian edn.) Vol. I. p. 364.

74. Roy and Indira, *op. cit.*, p. xii; Gupta, S. L., *op. cit.*, Vol. 24(3), p. 47; Roy, U. N., *Studies in Ancient Indian History and Culture* (Allahabad : Lokbharati Publications, 1969), Vol. I, p. 221.

75. Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

76. Pathak, V., *Pāncavī-Sātavī Śatābdiyon kā Bhārata* (Allahabad : Sahitya Sangam, 1990), p. 182.

77. Gauda, *op. cit.*, p. 30; Bonazzoli, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

78. Gauda, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*

81. Hazra, R. C., *Studies in the Purāṇic Records on Hindu Rites and Customs* (Delhi : Motilal Banarsidass, 1940, second edn. 1975), p. 132.

82. कुम्भराशिं मयि प्राप्ते गंगाद्वारे महोत्सवः/
बभूव बहुलैर्भूपैः कारितस्तीर्थतत्परैः//
तत्रोत्सवे नरा नार्यो बहुभूषणभूषिताः/
समाययुर्दर्शनार्थे परमानन्दनिर्भराः//*Bhaviṣya Purāṇa* (BhavP, Bombay : Venkateshwar Steam Press, 1910), III(iv). 7.37-38.

As the lovers were reportedly devoted to recitation of the Ādityahrdayastotra for securing their romantic objective in the month of Vaiśākha immediately after their departure from the mela, their meeting may be placed in the month of Caitra which should be the month of mela as well. BhavP, III(iv). 7.43-46.

83. *BhavP*, III(iv).p.36-50.

# River of Grace : The Kumbha Mela as a Sacred Place

## M. Darrol Bryant

### Sacred Places

Sacred spaces have played an important part in the story of humankind. From time immemorial, men and women have made pilgrimages to sacred places. Those sacred places may be natural as in the case of Mt. Fuji in Japan, Lha-moi La-tso Lake in Tibet or Mount Kenya in Africa, or they may be constructed sites such as the Shrine at Fatima, the Cathedral at Chartres, the City of the Sun in Peru or the Sweat Lodge of the Plains Indian. But amidst the remarkable diversity of sites and structures that have been regarded as sacred places by different religious communities and cultures, there is an equally remarkable consistency of purpose. Sacred places in widely different parts of the world share either one or all of the characteristic functions of sacred places. They are either places of communion between the human and divine, or places of power where human life might be transformed, or places that reflect or embody the sacred order of the divine, or all three of these.[1]

Brereton has observed the close connection that exists between sacred places and rituals. Rituals, he remarks,

> ... that a people either practice at a place or direct toward it mark its sacredness and differentiate it from other defined spaces.[2]

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It is this combination of place and gesture that allows the scholar access to the meaning dimensions of sacred places and the activities that occur there. But it is important, at the same time, to realize that sacred places are not always places that can be entered physically. They are not always sacred lands or temples or churches or mountains. Sacred places may also be places that one must enter imaginatively, as in the inner geography of the body in yoga, or visually, as in the space of a maṇḍala or sacred design. Or, a sacred place might contain all of these dimensions simultaneously as it calls our attention not only to its environmental setting and outward shape but also to the inner environment of the mind and imagination.[3]

It is this meeting of inner and outer environments–and the interplay between them–that is the focus of this study.

## The Setting

In this essay, we want to focus our attention on a remarkable sacred place in North India near the modern city of Allahabad in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Outside the city, we find the juncture of two of the holiest rivers of India, the Yamunā and the Gaṅgā. It is at the confluence of these two rivers that a religious festival takes place every twelve lunar years. That festival is known as the Kumbha Mela or Festival of the Pitcher.

This sacred place, the setting of the festival, is not marked by soaring mountains or other dramatic geographic features. Alongside the rivers are sandy flood plains where the rivers annually overrun their banks. The two rivers that meet here have their origins hundreds of kilometers away in the Himalaya. From their beginnings high in the mountain, they make their way across the northern plains of India to Allahabad, known to many by its ancient Hindu name of Prayāga, where they join. From their headwaters in the Himalaya and all along the way, these rivers are marked by places of pilgrimage where believers come to worship and to bathe in their sacred waters. At Allahabad, the Yamunā and the Gaṅgā join and the Gaṅgā then continues the journey across India until it finally empties itself into the Bay of Bengal. On the way, it passes through Benares, perhaps the holiest of the many holy cities of India, and creates a rich delta in Bengal as it fans out before emptying into the ocean. On its journey of over a thousand kilometers beyond Allahabad, the Gaṅgā serves as an important waterway for trade and transportation as well as inviting reverence as people all along its route come to be renewed in her sacred waters.[4]

In India, with its rich Hindu heritage and culture, rivers have often been regarded in more than human terms. Rivers bespeak another language, one that is articulated in the myths and legends of Indian life. The mythic story central to the Kumbha Mela is found in many different sources, but involves the original churning of the ocean and a pot or pitcher of the nectar of immortality that emerged from that original churning. In the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa,* one of the sacred texts of the Hindu traditions, the story is told of how the appearance of this pitcher of nectar provoked such a clamour on the earth that a messenger of the gods grabbed the pitcher and returned it to the heavens.[5] But in his flight back to the Beyond, some drops of the nectar of immortality fell to the earth. One of those spots where the nectar touched the earth was at the confluence of these two sacred rivers : Yamunā and Gaṅgā. But the mythic story also adds a third, even more powerful river to the two geographical rivers, the invisible Sarasvatī. Thus, the site of this great festival is at the confluence of three rivers, rivers that are at once human and divine.

This mythic background points to one of the significant features of the festival as a sacred place. For the believer, this environment has been touched by divine gifts; it is here in this place that the nectar of immortality was spilled and not somewhere else. Thus, it is to this spot that Hindus from across India come to participate in the festival. It is, as we indicated earlier, a place where, according to the myths and legends, the human and divine have been joined, and thus a place where human transformation can occur. But to the eye unformed by the mythic story, the site could be mistaken for a large sandy plain along two rivers.

On the occasion of the Kumbha Mela, people gather along the banks of the rivers. They camp in tents on the sandy flood plain in astonishing numbers. The juncture of the two rivers is the setting for something that becomes part of an inner environment as well.

## The Largest Human Gathering

Humankind across the planet has gathered to celebrate in festivals the meeting of divine and human life, or what Eliade has called "the manifestation of the sacred".[6] Religious festivals have been a feature of the human landscape in times past and present, East and West. In past millennia, people gathered at Stonehenge in the Southwest of England, for festivals we still do not fully understand - and recently "New Age" groups have begun to gather there again. Every year millions of Muslims make the pilgrimage to Mecca to fulfil their holy obligations. In Canada, Native peoples, Algonquin and Mohawk, regarded the Thousand Islands as a "garden of the gods", and journeyed there to dance on the rocky islands. Easter celebration draws hundreds of thousands to Jerusalem to walk the places that Jesus had walked. But in no instance is there as large a human gathering as the one that takes place at the Kumbha Mela.[7]

Every twelve lunar years, as many as twelve million people gather on the banks of the Yamunā and the Gaṅgā to celebrate the Festival of the Pitcher. As a consequence, it is now known to be the world's largest human gathering.

Gathering for festivals in sacred places, people have enacted a seemingly bewildering array of practices, gestures and symbolic actions which become more transparent as one grasps the sacred morphology of the festival in question. As adherents of different traditions have gathered at special places and times throughout history, they bring with them an inner environment of the body, mind and spirit that has been shaped by their religious and cultural traditions. This is certainly true at the Kumbha Mela as those who gather bring with them the stories, the memories, the beliefs, and practices that mark the bodies and lives of the Indian people.

Entries in the notebooks I kept during the Kumbha Mela that I attended in February of 1989-and added to later-record some of my first impressions of this huge gathering :

> I arrived in Allahabad on the third of February as the sun was setting. I was met by Venu Goswami, a younger brother of Shrivatsa Goswami who had originally invited me to join him for the Festival. As we drove to the Kumbha Mela, Venu spoke about what lay ahead. In the hour-long journey, we

> found ourselves increasingly in the midst of a human flood of humanity moving, in a variety of ways, towards the same destination. I learned that the Festival would be closed to vehicle traffic for the coming four days as the Festival was reaching its high point, both in numbers and in terms of the auspicious moment. As we neared the camp, the road was choked with pilgrims on their way to the Kumbha Mela, their worldly goods balanced atop their heads as they resolutely made their way to the banks of the sacred rivers. We finally came out through the city walls only to be confronted by a vast network of street lights that stretched as far as we could see over the camped city. Venu informed me that the grounds covered a 20 square kilometer area, and at this hour it was shrouded in the smoke of camp fires but alive with the booming microphones and loudspeaker systems that would be a constant feature of my five days at the Kumbha Mela.

It is hard to imagine the size of the camp that stretched before us. Over the days I was there, I would get to know it better, but the first view of it was overwhelming. What was especially impressive and significant was the moving mass of humanity :

> As we inched our way across one of the nine pontoon bridges that linked the Allahabad side of the river with the camp that spread out on the sandy flood plain beyond, we were engulfed in a human river of pilgrims entering the camp. Besides the occasional car, there were also a few bicycle rickshaws trying to make their way. But the dominant mode of transportation was by foot. People of all ages jammed the bridges in what I was to discover over the next days was a seemingly endless flow of pilgrims into and out of the camp. Day or night over the next days, I would never see the bridges empty, and the flow began to subside only by the day I left. Everyone seemed to be carrying something on their heads, balanced in that remarkably graceful Indian way, as they made their way towards their destination. The sound/noise was overwhelming: a veritable cacophony of words, music, and *mantras* all vying with one another to be heard. Horns honked, whistles blew, bicycle bells clicked, and beneath it all, the steady rustle of feet slapping the sand underneath.

This was but a first impression and observation of the remarkable human gathering that was unfolding. The Kumbha Mela lasts a lunar month, and in 1989, the most auspicious day of the Festival was February 6. The pilgrims who came to the Festival stayed for varying lengths of time: some for the whole month, others for a few days.[8]

## Seeing the Festival : Entering the Inner Environment

Religious festivals have social, archetypal, and cosmic dimensions that are all combined in remarkably compressed gestures and actions or elaborately dramatized in extended performative acts. One of the noteworthy acts of those gathered for the Kumbha Mela is their pilgrimage to the site itself. Most of the people come to the Festival on foot. Some, of course, come by plane and other forms of modern transportation. But most still come as did Ram Sharma, a pilgrim I met at the Festival. He and five others from his village in the state of Bihar had walked for fifteen days to be part of the Festival. They would stay for a week and then walk home again.

When I asked him why he had come, he said simply; "To bathe in the Gaṅgā".

It is difficult to understand the motivation if you do not share the inner environment of the pilgrim. While it is possible to describe the outer environment of this sacred place, the inner environment that the pilgrim brings with him or her is more difficult to comprehend. The simple response of Ram Sharma was the same one that I received from others time and again. Acts and gestures of piety reflecting a special inner environment were what I observed on my first morning at the river's edge :

> At the river, people are doing their morning ablutions. Occasionally, a flute being played somewhere cuts through the noise with its plaintive welcome to the new day. I also hear the blowing of a conch. The fiery red ball of the sun began to peek over the horizon, shedding its multicoloured hues through the haze and smoke that hangs over the camp. By the water, pilgrims go in and out, many with their lips moving in the rhythms of a silent *mantra* as the new day began. Some place sticks of incense in the sand and it wafts

> across the stirring camp. As I sit by the water watching the rising sun and the increasing bustle around me, I find myself meditating on the wonder and beauty of it all.

Or, on another occasion I wrote :

> Here, a constant stream of men, women and children enter the river, chanting and praying. Garlands of flowers are offered to the river along with tiny clay vessels of oil that are lit and placed in the river.
>
> As I criss-cross the camp, I am being drawn into this extraordinary event, watching the ceaseless flow of human beings; stopping to observe a sādhu seated before a fire with his trident, sign of Śiva, placed beside him; bemused by children gathered around a spigot washing some clothes and throwing water at one another; noting the colourful *sārīs* being dried while held by two human clotheslines; witnessing countless acts of *pūjā* (worship).
>
> It is unlike anything I have ever witnessed before.

Over the days I was at the Festival, I sought to enter into the inner environment that was present there as well as the outer place. This requires imagination if one is to go into the inner sacred places where the pilgrims live.

What I began to grasp is what scholars of religion call the "places of power" function of sacred spaces: that is, the conviction among the pilgrims that in these places "human life might be transformed". Clearly, that was part of the conviction as pilgrims entered the flowing waters of "Mother Gaṅgā".

Much of the energy of the Festival came to focus on the 6th of February, the most auspicious day of the Festival. It gained this status by virtue of an astrological conjunction that occurs only once every twelve lunar years. This cosmic connection met with the human conviction to create the "Day of Days" at the Festival.

## The River of Grace

The remarkable feature of this sacred place is the ever-flowing water of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā. On the 6th of February, everyone sought to gather at the Saṅgama or confluence of the two rivers. This was the moment most had come for. Let me turn again to my note-books:

> It was wall-to-wall people. A murmur of chant mixed with the ever-present loudspeakers to create a blanket of sound over the Saṅgama. The shores along the rivers were also filled with people, and long wooden boats plied back and forth carrying pilgrims out into the fast flowing waters. Along the banks, people could be seen in the soft light of pre-dawn taking their sacred dips.
>
> Earlier, Sri Jagadguru Purushottam Goswami, Shrivatsa's father and head of the community, shared with us a discourse on the Kumbha Mela in which he explained that the Festival is a ritual of purification and renewal. Through the centuries, believers have gathered on the banks of these sacred rivers to be renewed by offering their *pūjā* to Mother Gaṅgā and listening to the discourses of their teachers. For him, the Festival is a retreat, a time for self-examination and meditation, for reading the sacred writings, for performing acts of devotion and worship to Lord Krishṇa. Hence, I try to see what was unfolding before me in this way: a ritual of renewal.
>
> And it is possible to sense it as one watches the pilgrims make their way to the water's edge and enter a river that is, for them, more than a river. It is a living symbol of divine grace that flows and renews constantly those who enter its transforming waters. Off in the east, the bright ball of the sun inched up the horizon and a roar went up from the crowd: the human world rose up to greet the sun that spreads its crimson rays on this new day. As the sun rose, one could feel the mounting energies. A rush of joy seemed to ripple through the surging crowds. And the sunrise was beautiful: that ball of flaming red rose through the dust and haze like a jewel to refract its light on all. It revealed a humanity that spread as far as I could see along the banks of the rivers and beyond. And, for a moment, the moving waters and the ebb and flow of the humanity gathered there seemed to dance

> with one another in perfect harmony as the sun rose over it all.

> The pilgrims, nameless and numberless, were making their ways to waters, entering those waters, then returning to the banks and there changing their clothes, visiting with others, then making their way to those countless places they had come from. Had they been renewed? Cleansed? Freed from sin? Strengthened on their road to *mokṣa* or liberation? I could not judge; I could only wonder as I stood there transfixed by this sea of humanity in motion in response to promptings that could not be seen but could be felt. What I felt was not easily transformed into words. So, I just stood and watched as the pilgrims, dressed in *sāris* that ran the full range of the colours of the rainbow, and *dhotis*, and covered in shawls, passed before me. I had never seen so many people gathered in one place in my life, and I doubt I ever will again.

Throughout the day, I found myself wondering about the meaning of what I had witnessed. The questions had exceeded my answers, and I found myself drawn again and again to the rivers since it was obviously the rivers that constituted the heart of this sacred place :

> I returned again to the river, upstream from the Saṅgama, and watched again the pilgrims there performing their *pūjā* on the banks of "Mother Gaṅgā". The river flowed by, flowers were cast on its endless currents, incense was stuck in the bank, pilgrims entered and dipped themselves the ceremonial three times, the ritual continued. It went on as it has for centuries. I found myself wondering if I was watching an eternal drama, one that would continue as long as humanity remains aware of its need for renewal, for purification, for the revival of the spirit. I wondered as I watched again as the streaming waters of the Gaṅgā met the streaming masses of humanity in the wonderful dance where outer meets inner and becomes a living symbol of something more.

Here are my reflections on my last day at the Kumbha Mela, two days after the "Day of Days" :

> I made my way to the river for my final farewells. I felt I wanted to be at the river one last time, to see once again the cycle of pilgrims coming to and from the river, performing their acts of worship, continuing the rhythms that mark this extraordinary event.
>
> I can see that Mother Gaṅgā is more than just another river. It is the living presence of the mystery of life's origins and continuities as it ceaselessly flows towards its destiny. It is moving to watch the reverence with which it is approached, entered, and acknowledged through time-honoured rituals. The river is, as it were, an endlessly flowing symbol of grace that renews as it cleanses, that transforms as it receives. For the pilgrim, it seems to have a power, presence, and a persona that is difficult for me to grasp, though I can glimpse it in their acts of devotion. And I find it very moving. There is even a moment when I feel caught up in the archetypal drama as the endless round of pilgrims meet and enter its endless flowing waters. But then it draws away.

## A Sacred Place Revisited

At the outset, we pointed to the scholarly interpretation of the functions of sacred places. We noted that sacred places function as places of communication, places of power, and places that embody.

It is possible to see all these functions occurring at the Kumbha Mela. At the heart of this sacred place and Festival are the waters of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā. Water has always had a primordial significance within the religious life of humankind. It is a multivalent symbol. It is, in the words of the *Bhaviṣyottara Purāṇa* (31. 14) "the source of all things and all existence."[9] It is, at the same time, the renewer and purifier of all. It is a living water. When this rich symbolism of water is combined with the symbolism of immersion in the water, then we are moving closer to a central feature of this Festival. Eliade remarks that:

> ... in water everything is "dissolved", every "form" is broken up, everything that has happened ceases to exist; nothing that was before remains after immersion in water ... Immersion is the equivalent, at the human level, of death, and at the cosmic level, of the cataclysm which periodically dissolves the world.

> ... Breaking all forms, doing away with all the past, water possesses this power of purifying, of regenerating, of giving new birth; for what is immersed in it "dies", and, rising again from the water, is like a child without any sin or any past, able to ... begin a new and real life."[10]

When seen in this light, the sacred "Mother Gaṅgā" begins to disclose her place in the life of India and the traditions that have shaped her inner environment. In this Festival, the waters of the rivers are at once the living waters of grace, renewal, and transformation. And immersion in the "Mother", which is at once the visible Gaṅgā and Yamunā and the invisible Sarasvatī, is the ritual action that transforms. The pilgrimage to this sacred place coupled with the transforming power and presence of the sacred waters combine to make the Festival of the Pitcher a remarkable festival and a remarkable sacred place.

It is a place where outer and inner environments meet in ways that are not easily grasped. It is a place where the rivers flow on and on, reflecting the light of the sun's rising and setting, and carrying with them the offerings of devoted hearts - flowers and oil-lit lamps - as they silently continue their endless journey. It is a place of rivers of grace.

## ENDNOTES

1. See Brereton (1987 : 526ff) in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*.
2. *Ibid.*
3. For a wonderfully moving account of a pilgrimage to the sacred mountains of Wu T'ai in Northern China, its festivals, monasteries, and communities, see Blofeld (1988 : 114-155). This account is even more precious given the destruction in the region after 1949.
4. For a fuller account of the river Gaṅgā, see Newby (1979). It is delightful and full of interesting information.
5. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is in volumes seven through eleven in the Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology Series [1987]. The quotations here are from volume IX and indicate the book and verse.

   In the version, we find in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the churning of the ocean also brings forth a horse "radiantly white like the moon" (VIII. 8.3) and an elephant with four tusks that "eclipsed the splendour and beauty of the snowy mountain, Kailāsa" (VIII.8.4). But when the pitcher appeared, it created such a fuss, with everyone clambering for it, that, according to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, it was seized by a divine messenger and returned to the heavens. However, before the Lord "flies away on Garuḍa" (VIII. 10), Mohinī, the Lord in a feminine form, is able to distribute, due to her beguiling ways, some of the nectar to the "gods", thus beslowing on them immortality (VIII.9). Enroute and as battle erupts, some drops spilled on the earth, according to one of the several versions of the story, and these sites became the places of the Festival.

6. See Eliade (1968 : 1 ff).

7. There is surprisingly little written in the literature of religious studies on the Kumbha Mela. Typical is the single line one finds in Smart [1989:100]. "We see India drawn together by great pilgrimages, at Banaras and at the vast Kumbh Mela fair at Prayag, where the rivers Juman and Ganges meet the invisible river Sarasvati." An exception is the moving contemporary interpretation of the Festival found in Kumar [1984:159-90]. I had read it prior to going to India for the Kumbha Mela but I had forgotten it. I reread it after my return and gained much from it.

8. Some other material drawn from my field study of the Kumbha Mela has appeared in the *Journal of Dharma* 15(4) : 341-56. For a fascinating account of Rajasthani pilgrims, though not to the Kumbha Mela, see Gold (1988) which demonstrates the centrality of release or *mokṣa* to the pilgrim's expectation and intention. Gold's study is a fine example of field research in which the scholar is self-conscious of her own role in the study.

9. As quoted in Eliade [1968:190].

10. *Ibid* (p. 194). See also other works by Eliade, [1963:39-54] *Myth and Reality*; [1974:77-115] *Man and the Sacred*; and, [1965] *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*.

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# Kumbha Mela : An Interpretation

## S. L. Gupta

### Introduction

Many theologians believe that because mythical legends embody the convictions of a people as to their gods and other divine beings, religion has its roots in mythology. Hindu mythology presents a most colourful legendary lore. An outstanding legend is the churning of the ocean which is intimately connected with the history of the Kumbha Mela. The word 'kumbha' literally means a pot or a pitcher and in this context it means the pot of nectar, the finding of which was the sole object of the gods and the demons. This pot was specially designed by Viśvakarman (the architect of gods).

### Mythological Origin of the Kumbha

The gods and the demons were engaged in endless war with each other. As the demons were stronger in body, the gods were often times defeated and suffered a heavy loss in rank. All those demons that were killed in the battle were restored to life by the miraculous power and mystic charm (*sanjīvanīvidyā*) of Śukrācārya who was their spiritual preceptor. The gods tried to secure this mystic charm and they sent Kaca, the son of Brihaspati, to learn the secret of it from Śukrācārya by becoming his disciple. When this was found out by the demons, they killed him (Kaca) thrice but every time he was restored to life as a result of the entreaties of the daughter of Śukrācārya, Devayānī, who was nursing a secret love for Kaca. During this time Kaca had almost succeeded in acquiring a full knowledge of the charm and was about to leave. Devayānī made a proposal of marriage but Kaca stoutly but modestly refused to marry her saying that she is his *guru's* daughter and therefore like a younger sister to him. This enraged Devayānī and she cursed him. By the curse Kaca lost the power of the charm and all that he had learned from Śukrācārya.

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This greatly disappointed the gods and they approached Viṣṇu who told them that the only way to become immortal was to find the nectar which lay hidden at the bottom of the Great Ocean. But that was a stupendous task which the gods alone were unable to shoulder. It was, therefore, slyly proposed to take the demons into confidence by suggesting the allurement that they would have their share of nectar which would make them immortal. Leaders of both the parties conferred with each other and it was unanimously agreed to churn the ocean. The gods were led by Viṣṇu, Varuṇa, Indra, and Śiva as chiefs, whereas the chiefs of the demons were Virocana (son of Prahlāda), Bali (son of Virocana), Śambhara and Nemi.

## Churning of the Ocean

The mountain Mandara[1] was made the churning rod and the colossal serpent, Ananta Nāga, became the rope which coiled round the rod. The gods held the tail and the demons held the mouth of Ananta and the operation started in right earnest. With an astounding roar and deafening report, the ocean yielded up at first installment of fumes, thick gases, fires, electricity, and many other luminous objects. Then to the greatest surprise and fear of the participants the whole surface surged with deadly poison. It filled the bounds of the ocean and should have annihilated all living creatures of the cosmos if left unchecked. Who else but god Śiva could have had the power to bring it under control? So both parties prayed to Śiva and the compassionate lord quaffed off the whole poison and thus rescued the agonised parties on the one hand and saved the whole cosmos from imminent destruction on the other, and thus the fear was gone. The process of churning the ocean to the finish was resumed with fresh strength.

## Fourteen Gems[2] Churned Out of the Ocean

Then one by one there appeared goddess Lakṣmī, the paragon of beauty; Kaustubha, the priceless jewel; Pārijātaka, one of the five trees of paradise; Surā, spirituous liquor; Candramā, the moon; Kāmadhenu, the milch cow; Airāvatagaja, the elephant of Indra; Rambhā, the celestial nymph; Ucchaiśravas, the seven- faced flying horse; Haridhenu, the celestial bow of Viṣṇu; Śaṅkha, the celestial conch; and last of all outflashed Dhanvantari, the physician of gods, holding the most coveted prize, the pot full of nectar (*amrita*), the word for that pot is *kumbha*.

## Hot Chase for Amrita

No sooner did they perceive the nectar-pot (*kumbha*) than there was an outburst on all sides. Each party, with tongues rolling and mouths watering to taste the ambrosial liquor, ran pell-mell and made frantic efforts to seize the *kumbha* as soon as possible. Again the demons' superior strength stood them in good stead and they had very nearly got hold of it by force. In the meantime the gods had solicited Jayanta, the son of god Indra, and the alert heir-apparent of paradise, to come to their help. Jayanta, without losing a moment, changed himself into a rook and before the demons were alarmed he made away with the pot. By way of precaution the gods sent four planets[3] to accompany Jayanta : the Moon to protect the pot from trickling, oozing, or dripping, the Sun to protect it from bursting from below, Jupiter to protect it from the attack of the demons, and Saturn to protect it lest Jayanta himself should devour its contents. Jayanta was hotly chased by the demons but he was too quick to them. Evading them he flew over the earth en route to heaven. But feeling tired on account of the heavy burden and fast race he took a little rest at four places—Haridwār, Prayāga (Allahabad), Ujjain, and Nāsik.[4] While resting he placed the *kumbha* (nectar-pot) on the ground and its very touch sanctified these places which became holy for all the time to come. Jayanta took twelve days to complete his flight to heaven. The demons also arrived in heaven when nectar was being served to the gods. Lord Viṣṇu assumed the form of a beautiful damsel, Mohinī, and deluded the demons. But Rāhu disguised himself as a god and attempted to drink the nectar. Viṣṇu was informed of the fraud and severed his head. But as Rāhu had tested a little nectar he became immortal and his two parts became two planets. The head or Rāhu became the ascending node and Ketu the descending node. After drinking the nectar all the gods became immortal.

Since one day of the gods is reckoned to be one year of the mortals, Jayanta's twelve days flight becomes twelve years and every twelfth year in rotation saints, sages, ascetics, anchorites, holy persons, and sādhus (hermits) of all ranks began to assemble at these *tīrthas* (holy places). The huge congregation and surge of humanity assembling there and attending with religious fervour is known as the Kumbha Mela, the ageless festival of the *kumbha,* one of the greatest religious festivals of India.

These festivals occur at a certain combination of Aquarius, Aries, Sun and Jupiter. A holy dip on these occasions is considered superior to a thousand *aśvamedha-yajñas* (horse-sacrifices) or any other far reaching religious activity or performance. Therefore, people of all walks of life, rich, poor, men, women, children assemble in millions to bathe and to secure a sure place in heaven after death, and thenceforth freedom from the cycle of births and deaths.

## Further Significance

Historically there was a practical advantage in such gatherings. In olden days the means of communication were not facile and such gatherings in the name of religion at one particular time and without invitation were the fittest occasions for the mutual exchange of views on religious, philosophical, or even social matters. The visitors felt a sort of inner urge to participate in such conferences. They followed a simple dictum : *vāde vāde jāyate tattvabodhaḥ* -- healthy discussions lead to the finding out of Truth -- and in doing so they practically churned their hearts, minds, and spirits, and reached eternal and axiomatic truths which till today remain unchallenged and universally appreciated.

## The First Kumbha

It is not known when the first Kumbha Mela was held. Votaries of this festival call it eternal or as old as creation itself. The Chinese traveller, Hsüan Tsang, who visited India in the seventh century in the reign of Harṣavardhana, gives a colourful account of the Kumbha Mela and asserts on hearsay that this was an agelong festival and speaks of its antiquity.

## Number Twelve

It has been pointed out that the Kumbha Mela is held every twelfth year. In this connection the number twelve has its own astrological importance. Every year in the month of Māgha the Moon and the Sun lie in Makara (Capricornus) but the conjunction of Jupiter along with them occurs only after twelve years and this occasion is considered to be the fittest and the most auspicious time for a Kumbha Mela.

Secondly, the number twelve has yet another significance, philosophical and spiritual. Man is possessed of two kinds of organs: five *jñānendriyas* (organs of perception)–the skin, tongue, eyes, ears, and nose; and five *karmedriyas* (organs of action)–the anus, the organ of generation, hands, feet, and speech[5]. The eleventh organ is the mind and the twelfth is the intellect. Now since attendance at the Kumbha is piously regarded as the stepping-stone for *mokṣa*,which is vouchsafed as the ultimate reward, it is definitely expected that the holy, religious-minded, eminent sādhus and the virtuous who must have shunned all carnal passions by fully mastering these twelve components in order to become real recipients of *mokṣa*, will attend the Kumbha. Further, it is incumbent on them to demonstrate to others by their own example the efficacy of this practice.

## Allegorical Representation of the Kumbha

The word *deva* (god) means the good, the virtuous, the shining one (from the root *div*, to shine) and demons are the evil spirits, the very negation of god-hood. As in the world so also in an individual there are good qualities as well as evil tendencies, man being an admixture of both. The mind[6] which makes man the lord of the whole creation is so vast and illustrious as to surpass time and space. It is like the sea which is often churned by the rod of *buddhi* (the intellect and discretion), sometimes yielding vicious and poisonous thoughts (*viṣa*) which can only be drunk or annihilated by Śiva, the auspicious one. The results of the churning are : Lakṣmī (lust for power and self), Kaustubha, flying horse, elephant, etc. (all standing for aggrandisement), Pārijātaka, Kāmadhenu (wishful thinking for miraculous fulfilment), Rambhā (lust for worldly pleasures), all of which may fittingly be compared to the jewels churned from the physical ocean. But in spite of the mad race for worldly enjoyments, the inner self longs[7] for some healing touch (Dhanvantari) to come with a nectar-pot (contentment and satisfaction), and once this stage of contentment (nectar) is achieved everybody tries to grab and seize it. But it is retained by the good and the firm who are not assailed by pleasure and pain. According to the myth, to save it from the clutches of the evil doers, one who has really conquered his passions, in this case Jayanta, runs away with it and in the course of his flight, he stops at the four ends of human existence. These are : *dharma*, righteousness, corresponding to Haridwār; *artha*, attainment of prosperity, to Ujjain; *kāma*, love or desire, to Nāsik : and lastly *mokṣa*, salvation or final beatitude, corresponding to Prayāga, which is the ultimate aim. At Allahabad the confluence is of the three currents, the *guṇas*, the constituents of human nature, namely, *sattva* (goodness), the ochre river Gaṅgā; *raja*s (passion or emotion), the blue river Yamunā; and *tamasa* (inertia), the invisible river Sarasvatī, which disappears when the other two are prominent. People in thousands, nay, millions assemble at one or the other of these four ends of life; but those who make the greatest sacrifice (i.e., come to Prayāga) ultimately get the nectar of contentment which makes them immortal.

## Kumbha at Prayāga

Of all the four places hallowed by the nectar-pot Prayāga is by far the most sacred of the holy places. Its glories are extolled by all the holy scriptures. For that reason it is regarded as the Tīrtharāja, the king of holy places, or Tīrthanāyaka, the leading holy spot. It is the very threshold, as it were, between the terrestrial and the celestial worlds and one who is fortunate to get *darśana* (an eye soothing glimpse) of the holy Saṅgama (confluence of rivers), the venerable spot first touched by the *kumbha* (nectar-pot), can bathe (*majjana*) there in the waters of the trio (Triveṇī).

This is the meeting place of the ochre-coloured Gaṅgā, the blue Yamunā, and the invisible Sarasvatī. He who can drink the holy water should at death step into heaven and enjoy life for all eternity.

The Triveṇī is like the auspicious knot of the triplatted sacred thread borne by Mother India, whose diadem is the snowy peak of the Himalaya, and whose sacred feet are constantly washed by the Indian ocean. Eminent poets like Vālmīki (the first poet) and Kālidāsa (the poet laureate par excellence) describe the spiritual and cultural glory of Prayāga in an excellent manner.

## Time for the Prayāga Kumbha Mela

The time for Kumbha is calculated by the astrologers. "When Guru (Jupiter) enters Meṣa (Aries, the first sign of the zodiac) and when the Sun and the Moon lie in Makara (Capricornus, the tenth of the zodiac), this conjunction of the Sun and the Moon is the fittest time for holding the Kumbha fair at Prayāga, the Tīrthanāyaka or the leading holy place."[8] Such auspicious conjunction of the planets and the constellations of the zodiac occurred in 1966 in the months of January and February. Hence, the fair was held with all solemnity and lasted for a month. Out of all these days January 7th (Pauṣa Pūrṇimā), 14th (Makara Saṅkrānti), 21st (Maunī Amāvāsyā), 26th (Vasanta Pañcamī), and 5th February (Māgha Pūrṇimā) were conspicuously auspicious days for a sacred bath in the holy waters of the Saṅgama. It is estimated that 12,900,00 persons took their holy dip on these occasions. The number at the last Kumbha in 1954 was 80 lakhs.

Special and most remarkable features on all such auspicious occasions are the long and colourful processions of the Nāgās (a sect of mendicants who always remain naked), sādhus of different orders with their saffron robes and banners aloft, and the leaders moving in gilded chariot seats. Their retinues surge from behind and shout religious slogans. All this presents a grand and unforgettable spectable. In 1966, however, a gloom was cast on the 25th when the mortal remains of our Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, came for immersion at the holy Saṅgama.

For this mela, government, private bodies, and voluntary organizations rose to the occasion to render all help to the pilgrims. Special trains were run from all directions; temporary bridges for easy communication were constructed; loud-speakers were installed at different corners; and barricades were erected to facilitate one way passage. Thus ended the Kumbha Fair 1966.

## REFERENCES

1. *tato niścitya mathanam yoktram kritvā ca vāsukim /*
   *manthānam mandaram kritvā mamanthuramitaujasaḥ //*
   *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki, I. 46.18.

2. *lakṣamīḥ kaustubha-pārijātaka-surā-dhanvantariś candramā /*
   *gāvo kāmadudhāḥ sureśvaragajo rambhādi devāṅganāḥ /*
   *aśvaḥ saptamukho viṣam haridhanuḥ śaṅkho'mritam /*
   *cāmbudheḥ ratnānīha caturdaśo pratidinam kuryuḥ sadā maṅgalam / /*
   *Maṅgalācaraṇa*; also refer to
   the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki, I.46.20-39.

3. *candraḥ prasravaṇād rakṣām sūryo visphoṭanād dadhau /*
   *daityebhyaśca guruḥ rakṣām saurir devendrajād bhayāt / /*

4. *viṣṇudvāre tīrtharāje'vantyām godāvarītaṭe /*
   *sudhāvindu-vinikṣepāt kumbhaparveti viśrutam / /*

5. *śrotram tvakcakṣuṣī jihvā nāsikā caiva pañcamī /*
   *pāyūpastham hastapādam vākcaiva daśamī smritā / /*
   *Manusmriti*, II.90.

6. *dūraṅgamam jyotiṣām jyotirekam tannme manaḥ śivasaṅkalpam astu /*
   *Yajurveda*, 34.1b.

7. *asato mā sadgamaya tamaso mā jyotirgamaya.*

8. *meṣarāśigate jīve makare candrabhāskarau /*
   *amāvāsyām tadā yogaḥ kumbhākhyas tīrthanāyake / /*

# Kumbha Mela : The Greatest Pilgrimage in the World

## Miloslav Krása

Morning dawned, the soft-eyed Sītā wandered with the princes brave,
To the spot where ruddy Gaṅgā mingles with dark Yamunā's wave,
And they crost the shady woodland, verdant lawn and grassy mead,
Till the sun was in its zenith, Rāma then to Lakshmaṇa said :
"Yonder mark the famed Prayāga, spot revered from age to age,
And the line of smoke ascending speaks some *rishi's* hermitage
There the waves of ruddy Gaṅgā with the dark blue Yamunā meet,
And my ear the sea-like voices of the mingling waters greet.
Mark the monarchs of the forest severed by the hermit's might,
And the logs of wood and fuel for the sacrificial rite,
Mark the tall trees in their blossom and the peaceful shady grove,
There the sages make their blossom and the peaceful shady grove,
There the sages make their dwelling, thither, Lakshmaṇa, let us rove."
Slowly came the exile wand'rers, when the sun withdrew its rays,
Where the vast and sea-like rivers met in sisters' sweet embrace ... [1]

A little to the east of the town of Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh the mighty flow of two large Indian rivers rolling across the large northern lowland unite. They are the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā. Both spring from the glacier slopes of the Himalaya mountains and therefore never run dry, not even in times of greatest heat and drought. Whereas the Yamunā is clear and is given her dark, blue colour by the cloudless skies; the waters of the Gaṅgā are turbid and muddy. And their confluence provides a fascinating view of boisterous merging and eventual quiet union. The surrounding country-side is a plain, the river banks are covered with interrupted belts of aged trees and in the distance can be seen great bridges spanning the wide riverbeds, the distant silhouette of the Allahabad suburb and high walls of the medieval fortress leaning against the northern bank of the Yamunā, erected by the Mughal emperor Akbar. The widespreading plain, framed by the branches of both rivers is practically deserted most of the year, apart from a few light wooden constructions set up sparsely; during the rainy period most of it is covered with mud. An uninteresting aspect at first glance.

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And yet this is the most sacred spot in India for every orthodox Hindu. For many centuries and perhaps for thousands of years this is the place of the most amazing meetings of people, of religious fervour and unheard of rites, joyful meetings and great tragedies. It is a colourful, unique aspect, both captivating and crushing. Here mythology is interwoven with history, ancient tradition with modern times, true religious ignition with simple curiosity and cold commercial scheming. It is the stage of Kumbha Mela, the greatest fair of all nations and of all times. Every twelfth year in the month of Māgha, according to the Indian calendar, when the sun stands in the sign of the Ram, and jupiter is in the sign of the Aquarius, the plain fills with millions of pilgrims from all corners of India, wanting to rid themselves of sins through cleansing baths at spots where the supernatural character of Hindu *dharma* manifests itself in concentrated form and in lavish generosity.

The natural importance of the life-giving rivers, the suggestive symbolism of their union, the majestic quiet and beauty of the surrounding nature with its colour-play with the river-waves, paired with the tradition and fame of the place itself, has also given rise to innumerable tales and legends. Religious thought has endowed with immortality this sacred confluence of the grand rivers, thus multiplying the importance of each of them in Indian mythology. Hindus are even convinced that here yet a third river flows, invisibly, into the Gaṅgā, the mythical Sarasvatī and therefore call this place Triveṇī Saṅgama – the confluence of three rivers. Sarasvatī is said to flow underground, where she went into hiding away from wicked demons, so as to safely meet with the Gaṅgā and Yamunā. This belief could have arisen from an earthquake long ago, when the earth really swallowed up a river.

Strictly speaking, according to preserved historical evidence, the pilgrimages known as Kumbha Mela, do not occur earlier than the seventeenth-eighteenth century. Nevertheless, records on the importance of Prayāga (Allahabad of today)—one of the first towns founded already by the Aryan conquerors of India—as well as about Triveṇī Saṅgama, can be traced in the oldest Indian literary works. Already in the *Rigveda*[2] it is noted that to bathe at the confluence of the black and white rivers leads to heavenly blessedness, and those who die there voluntarily are said to become immortal. Evidence of the holiness and religious merits of Prayāga, resulting from bathing during the month of Māgha, is also given by the Purāṇas; and in the famous Indian epic *Mahābhārata* the pilgrim is promised that the sins of his entire family will be forgiven if he dives into the waves of the confluence of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā; a single bathe being sufficient for purification, regardless of the number of sins committed.

It is here that the epos *Rāmāyaṇa* places the seat of the mythical prophet Bharadvāja whose dwelling (*āshrama*), situated opposite Anand Bhavan, the family seat of the Nehrus, is still shown today to the pilgrims in Allahabad. Prayāga was also praised in poems by the famous poet Kālidāsa and the great medieval philosopher Śaṅkarācārya is also connected with establishing the tradition of regular meetings of the sādhus at this holy spot.

More often, however, the Kumbha Mela is said to be taken from one of the most fundamental and widely circulated legends of Hindu mythology-that on the churning of the Milk Ocean. According to this legend, the gods and demons churned the Milk Ocean, the symbol of life on earth, trying to wrench from it its treasures. For this purpose they used the body of the serpent Ananta which like a rope was wound round a gigantic churning rod—the mythical Mount Meru. Following all the treasures, the clay jug (*kumbha*) filled with the nectar (*amrita*), the potion of immortality, emerged finally from the milky sea. Immediately a fight began over the *amrita*, among the gods and demons, during which the stronger demons had taken possession of the jug. But Jayanta, the son of the god Indra, took it from them, and changing into a bird, escaped with it into the heights of heaven. The demons pursued him and Jayanta—according to the most frequent of the many versions of this legend—alternatingly landed with the jug to repose on four locations : In Prayāga, Hardwār, Nāsik and Ujjainī. The touch of the miraculous jug sanctified these localities for ever and turned them into sacred places of pilgrimage; Kumbha Mela is really held to this day at all these places, at different times, of course, and not so extensively as in Prayāga, which is called *tīrtharāja*—the king of all places of pilgrimage.

The first historical records on religious festivities in Prayāga are reported from about the mid-seventh century. The Chinese traveller Hsüan Tsang was also in India about that period and he was eye witness to a gathering of half a million worshippers. The Indian king Harṣavardhana with his court, rulers of the Indian border states, famous sages, artists, ascetics and beggars were also the pilgrims. It is said that the festivities of that period were held at five-year intervals, each lasting 75 days. At that time Buddhists as well as Hindus took part in the sacrifices and rites as well as Jainas and other religious sects. It was there that king Harṣavardhana distributed his treasures as gifts to Buddhist monks, to brāhmaṇas and as alms to the poor, and so generous was he that after 75 days he no longer possessed a single personal jewel and returned to his metropolis clad only in a piece of borrowed cloth. [3]

We learn from Hsüan Tsang about yet another tradition of a further object of worship in the region of Triveṇī Saṅgama—about the sacred fig-tree called Akshay Vat. The origin of the Indian custom of tree-worship is certainly much older but here, linked with belief in the supernatural effects of the holy waters, this worship acquired forms of religious suicide, which at the time of Hsüan Tsang were not of an exceptional character. It is said that after fasting the believers jumped from a branch of the spreading fig-tree into the river, where they drowned. Akshay Vat—the immortal fig-tree is today placed in a small cellar temple inside the Akbar fortress. Only its forked trunk is visible, adorned with flowers, masks and various votive objects and it is worshipped as the embodiment of the god Śiva.

It was necessary, as recently as in the middle of the last century, for the authorities to forbid another custom, by which pilgrims who wanted to voluntarily end their lives jumped from a boat into the holy stream having three heavy jugs filled with water tied around their waists.

All these myths, traditions, historical events and vivid experience of previous generations have left in the minds of the present-day Hindus, perhaps not a very clear but an unmistakable awareness of the memorability of the Triveṇī Saṅgama and great faith still in the miraculous effect of bathing at these places. Only as an immediate witness to some of the melas is it possible to realise the depth and extent of the roots of this faith. Pilgrims assemble there annually around January and February, but the really large gatherings of millions take place only every sixth year, when the "semi" Kumbha Mela is held—Ardha Kumbha Mela—and then of course, the Kumbha Mela every twelfth year. The pilgrimage lasts for a whole month, but certain days, according to the position of the planets, are supposed to be especially favourable for mass-bathing. On such days the crowds are quite unbelievable, and are only limited by the space available. When the Kumbha Mela was held in 1954, about six million visitors were reported there, and when panic broke out among the crowds at one point three hundred pilgrims were trampled into the muddy ground.

These millions of people had arrived from all regions of India, they belonged to various social strata, speaking different languages. What attracts them as a magnet, all at one time, to the same place, is the still vital strength of religious tradition. This is no remote mythology or distant past, medieval ecstasy or semi-historic legend. It is the reality of the present twentieth century India. It is something fantastic to see the mixture of the ancient past and the present, and they both appear to be in place and equally natural. I was one of the two million participants in the first Ardha Kumbha Mela after the liberation of India and for me it was an unusually instructive and compelling experience. Again and again I walked from the town to the Triveṇī Saṅgama and every time I seemed to be in the midst of ecstasy. Each time as if I had entered another world, another age. But such is, even today, the spiritual world of Hinduism, and the everyday life of the majority of its confessors: ancient standards and anachronisms of the past in the midst of modern regulations, pressing problems and contemporary streams of ideas.

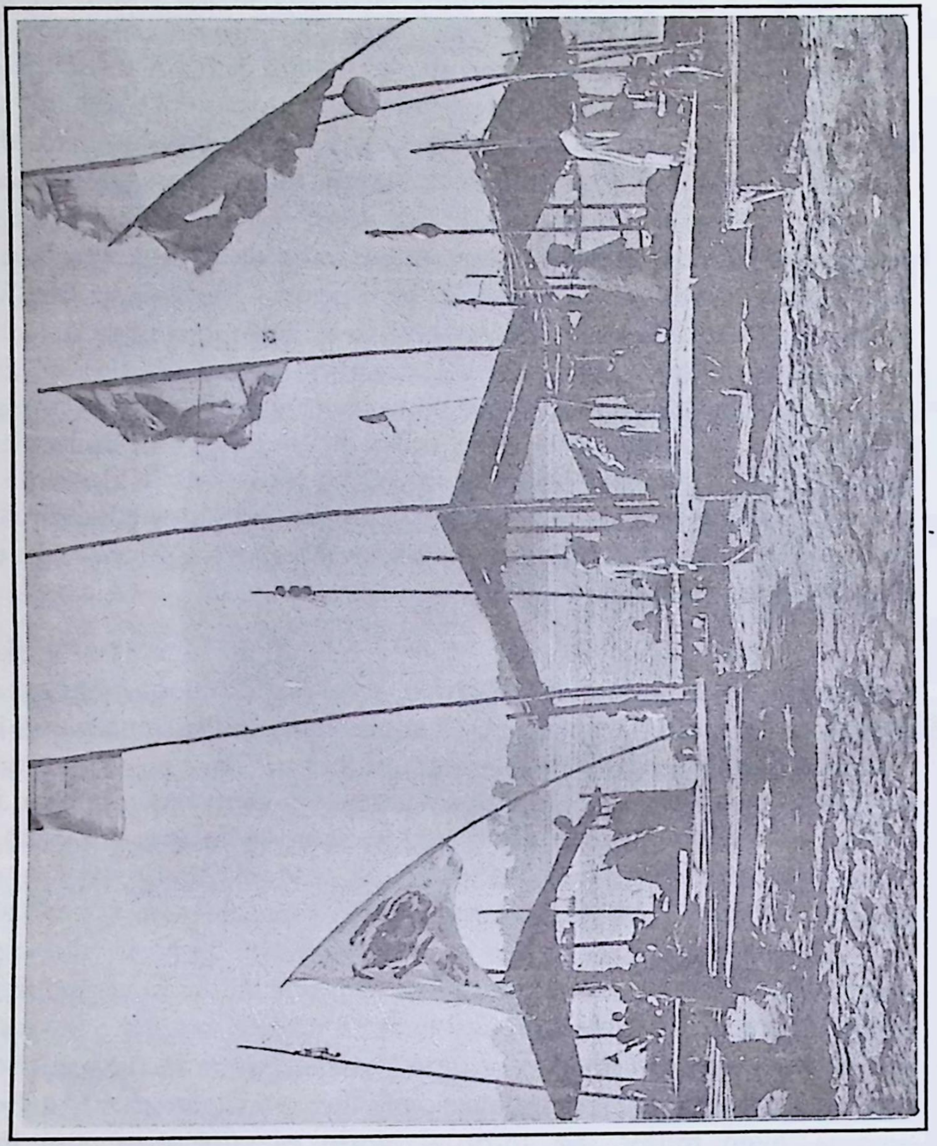

Fig. 1: Wooden huts of the paṇḍās marked with flags

The triangular space between the two rivers and the outskirts of the town has changed beyond all recognition. Thousands of emergency shelters have sprung up upon the plain, with both modern tents and old-style bamboo houses as were used long ago by ancient Indian *rishis*. Above these fluttered hundreds of coloured flags on wooden poles of the *paṇḍās* (Fig. 1) and of the worshippers of the various religious sects and groups. Special trains daily poured forth crowds of new pilgrims and all the roads in the vicinity had for a long time already been jammed with the traditional means of transport - slow and heavy ox- driven carts, and fast horse-drawn carriages of lighter structure. Many visitors simply arrived on foot. Most of those camping there together with their families had attended the festival at heavy financial sacrifice, considerable hardship and had overcome great obstacles during their journey. Many of them had to start out on their journey several months earlier so as to be able to arrive at their destination in time.

The most interesting participants in the mela are the sādhus—the holy men, religious ascetics, and those pretending to be such. Some hundred thousand of them are known to gather there among whom are also several hundred women. We notice sādhus in silent meditation, as well as eloquent defenders of the holy scripts with the microphone in their hands, real mystics and all kinds of impostors, who find here an opportunity for an easy though trifling gain. There are fakirs, sitting with twisted limbs on a board with sharp needles, as ascetics, standing the whole day in cold water or with gaze fixed upon the sun until they get blind, there they meditate standing on their heads, or cripple themselves by artificially killing their limbs, or, by piercing their tongues, sentence themselves to eternal silence. Among them are not only meager men hungry from regular fasting, but also muscular, well-fed and athletic types, some gorgeously clad and others entirely naked.

Some are members of the monasterial organisations (*akhāṛās*), which are supported by members of a religious sect or by rich individuals. Every *akhāṛā* has its reserved and well guarded place here and has, according to custom, a definite order in collective bathing. Because of such privileges quarrels and even brawls are known to break out among members of the various groups.

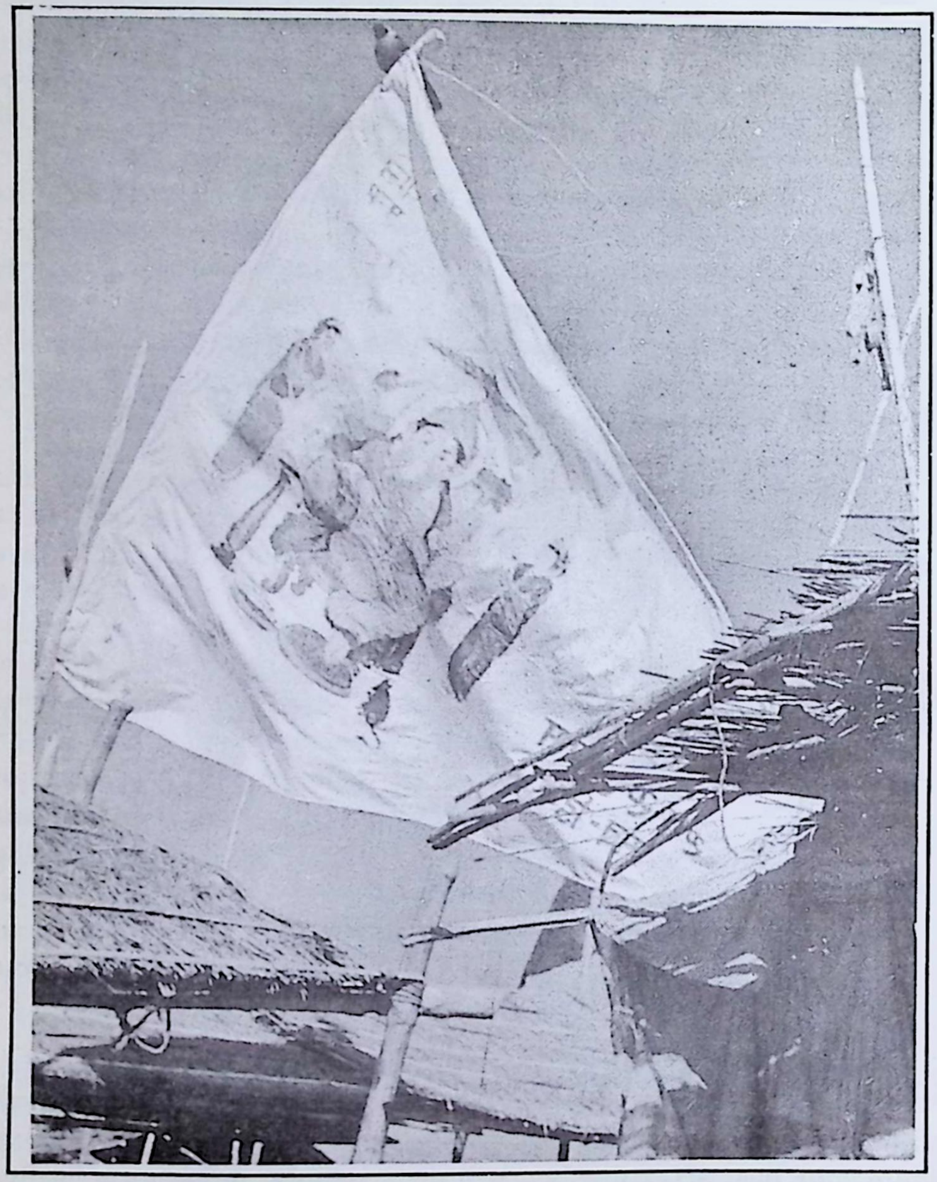

Fig. 2 : One of the flags marking a paṇḍā's hut

The majority of visitors are, of course, the simple pilgrims, who arrive either for the whole month and live on the open plain or just for the main days. They undergo the cleansing rites, the culmination of which is a bath in the confluence of the rivers. The cleansing rites are regulated by so-called *paṇḍās* or *prayāgavālas*, who hold their office by inheritance from time immemorial. Their function too is emphasized by an old legend which says that when building the fortress the heavy waters always flushed away its foundations until somebody advised the emperor Akbar that the wild flow of the Yamunā could only be calmed by sacrificing a brāhmaṇa. The chosen victim was willing, but laid down one condition: that his descendants should for-ever perform the cleansing ceremonies for the pilgrims. The organisation of these *paṇḍās*—and there are hundreds of families —is externally recognisable by the special signs on their flags (Fig.2) and they have gone so far as to have shared among themselves the whole of India, divided into districts, and the wealthier *paṇḍās* are said to send their agents travelling throughout the country to gather new clients for their masters. Precise regulations also exist for the distribution of visitors who attend the mela for the first time, but even so conflicts are unavoidable. Usually the "new" visitor belongs to that *paṇḍā* whom he first meets in the delimited outer space of the mela; if he manages to penetrate further he becomes the common property of the *paṇḍās*. When leaving he has to choose a single *paṇḍā* with whom he must sign on in writing for all future visits, for himself and his descendants. Thus every pilgrim has his inherited *paṇḍā* who keeps very detailed records about their clients. These records are thick, elongated volumes, folded in the centre and form the greatest treasure of the entire *paṇḍā* family. They are preserved in relatively good condition, so that such records can be of a considerable age and thus become an important linguistic and historical source. They are called *bahīs* (Fig. 3) and are kept according to castes.

The orthodox purification procedure was by no means simple and was completely prescribed in an old Indian work called *Prayāga Māhātmya*, which was said to be part of the *Matsya Purāṇa*. At present three parts of this ritual are mainly kept : shaving, bathing and paying fees. From the *paṇḍā* the pilgrim goes straight to the barber. Not a single hair must remain on his body. Even his eyebrows and eye-lids have to be shaved off. There are, of course, exceptions: the inhabitants of Allahabad need not have their heads shaved and Sikhs have only a symbolical little piece of hair shaved off as do married women; widows and South Indian women, however, are as a rule shaved entirely. The hair is then immersed in the river and for every single hair many new rebirths are forgiven or promises of a long stay in the heavenly realm are made.

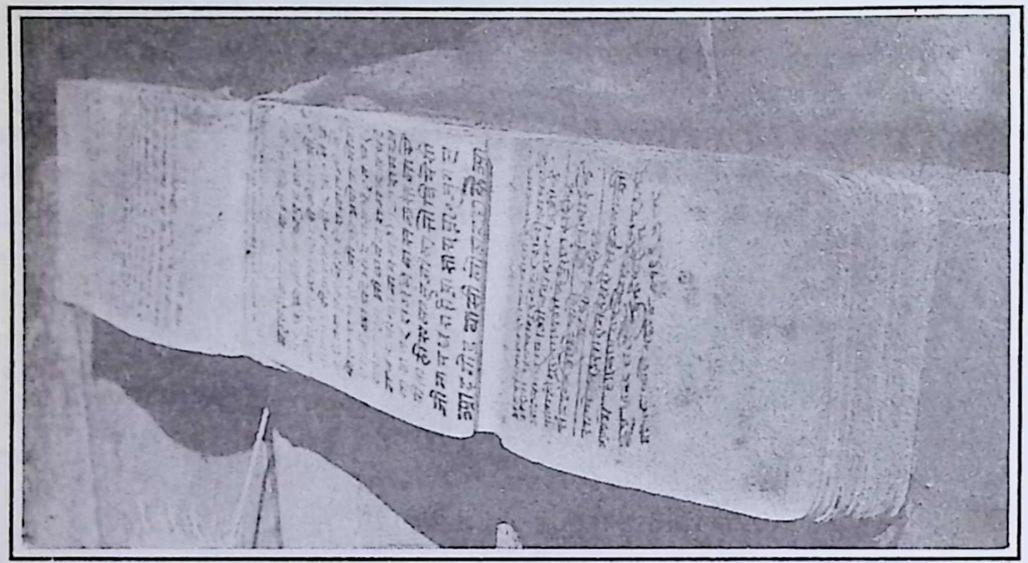

Fig. 3. Bahī— the book of hereditary clients of a paṇḍā

About one hundred and fifty years ago the enterprising sense of the white race incorporated itself quite organically into the traditional machinery around the mela. Triveṇī Saṅgama then belonged to the chosen Hinduist pilgrim places, where the British colonial government in India increased its income by the illfamed *pilgrims tax;* and to all those yearning for relief and advantages after death, this tax proved yet another unavoidable obstacle to the desired aim. It was a pass into paradise, this time however not sanctified by the Hinduistic but rather by the Christian authority of a foreign kingdom far over the seas. That these new measures were absolutely "up-to-date" is proved by the following Rules enacted by Regulation xviii, 1810, for the imposition of duties on pilgrims at Allahabad, and for the prevention of abuses in such collections :

> On every pilgrim on foot, one rupee. On every pilgrim with a horse, or palanquin, or carriage of any description, two rupees. On every pilgrim with a camel, three rupees. On every pilgrim with an elephant, twenty rupees. All other

duties or fees at the Ghaut, within the fort, or at any other place, are prohibited. Every pilgrim, on application to the Collector of the Land Revenue of Allahabad, shall be furnished with a licence to perform the usual ceremonies; and no person shall be admitted to perform such ceremonies without a licence. The inhabitants of the town and suburbs of Allahabad, and the Hindoos in the Honorable Company's Army, are exempt from duty; but every such person must be furnished with a licence of exemption from the Collector, before he can be entitled to perform the religious ceremonies. No tax of any kind shall be imposed upon the shaving barbers attending at the conflux of the rivers; but they shall be required to register their names at the Collector's office, and execute an obligation to the Collector, under a penalty of fifty rupees in every instance of contravention, not to perform that part of the ceremony resting with them, to any one without a licence. Access to the place of ablution shall be restricted to a certain number of gates and avenues, fixed by a barrier annually established, on the subsiding of the rivers, from the palisades of the fort to the bank of the river: and no person shall be admitted through such barrier without the prescribed licence. Such numbers and descriptions of native officers, as may be approved by the Board of Commissioners, shall be stationed by the Collector at the barrier, to prevent any person performing the ceremonies without a licence. A sufficient military force shall, on application of the Collector, be posted at the barrier during the mela or principal encourse of pilgrims in January and February, who shall prevent the people breaking through the barrier or otherwise forcing admission. The licences and exemptions, after being shown at the place of admission, shall be delivered to the officers, to be returned to the Collector in order to their being cancelled. Persons, with a view to avoid the payment of the duty, attempting to cross over in boats from the opposite side of the river to the place of ablution, shall be liable to a fine of three times the prescribed duty: and, if any barber shall assist any such person in performing the ceremonies, he shall be liable to the penalty stipulated in his engagements. No barber, except such as shall have entered into the prescribed

> obligation, shall officiate in the ceremonies; and any barber contavening this prohibition shall be liable to the penalty of fifty rupees for every pilgrim shaved; and, if not able to pay, he shall be committed to jail for three months.[4]

Allahabad had at that time, excluding the military garrison, only some 20,000 inhabitants, but the stream of pilgrims from all over India exceeded many times this number, just as it does today. We are able to visualise the number of pilgrims and their interests, from the description of a member of the London Missionary Society, who visited the place in 1826 and wrote about Allahabad :

> There are four hundred barbers in it, who are supported principally, by shaving the heads of the bathers in the sacred waters of the Yamuna and the Ganges; ... ... A small tax is levied by the British government on each of these strangers; and at festival times, the office where it is received, and licences to bathe are issued, is thronged with eager applicants, who grudge no labour, suffering, or expense, that they may obtain heaven by such means as are here required for the purchase of it !![5]

At that time of the year the water in the river is quite cold, so the diving there need not be always very pleasant. But the banks are crowded with bathers and on days which the astrologers indicate as being particularly favourable, the waters and the banks are absolutely packed with people. The pilgrims are also crammed together on many shallow places in the broad river bed as dozens of small boats carrying pilgrims cruise by.

The height of the whole mela is the communal ablution of the sādhus on the most important holiday. Also the hour of the day is precisely determined, starting some times at the twilight of dawn before sunrise. One by one or in small groups the "holy men" assemble like narrow streams to unite in the main procession according to the *akhārās*, in traditional order. The whole procession marches with dignity, towards Triveṇī Saṅgama lined by dense crowds of pilgrims. At the head of the procession rides a man on an unsaddled horse, followed by a gaily adorned elephant, behind which the sādhus march in long ranks. Some are "dressed" only in a light gray ash and long hair, others reclining under gorgeous parasols are driven to ablution in decorated cars. As soon as they approach the river a wave of excitement runs through the spectators. Men and women, everybody, run to the bank and even into the river and all in ecstasy observe how one *akhāra* after the other enter the waters together. At that moment the artificial white of their bodies disappears and there it is as if the cool stream would have washed away also all dignity as some of the sādhus quite naturally start playing like grown-up children in the waves.

Day after day passes on this human antheap, pilgrims arrive and depart, leaving their sins, their hair and their savings behind them. Alms of the rich sometimes reach-quite in the Harṣavardhana's tradition—considerable sums or they give cattle, or as at the mela of 1930, the gift of an elephant (one widow named Kuṭurā of Līlāpur Kalān village in Allahabad district also gifted away an elephant in the Ardha Kumbha Mela of 1982). Unfortunately the donor forgot to ensure a regular supply of rice for it. In order to also encourage the poor pilgrims to become generous donors, an interesting religiously-commercial transaction was thought out. There are enterprising owners of cattle who for a small fee pretend to sell a cow to the pilgrim; and there are sādhus, who for a small fee from the pilgrim, return these cows to their original owner. While the donation formula is spoken, the pilgrim is holding the cow by the ear or by the tail pretending to be the "owner" and thus acquires, in the face of the gods, immortal merit. Usually one gives but little food to the fakirs and sādhus, nevertheless just a few grains of rice given by passing pilgrims is sufficient to fill partly at least the bowl of the beggar before the evening.

Kumbha Mela has, of course, also its problems, which could be characterised as national. The organisation of transport, the maintenance of order, the minimum sanitation, all this demands no small effort from the municipal apparatus and civil servants of Uttar Pradesh State, on whose territory the mela is held. The outbreak of epidemics, or over-crowding on certain days has several times called for military assistance. Finally in the midst of religious gatherings, sermons, discussions, meditations and also various exhibitions of an educational and enlightening character and other publicity have their say. And it is interesting that nothing at all gives the impression of being alien, all this is lost in the sea of people and their temporary dwellings, just as in Hinduism so many different and new ideas and movements which were apparently incoherent, were merged.

The tradition of Triveṇī Saṅgama a still lives in India and is considered part of the national history and cultural heritage. Fifteen years ago the ashes of Mahatma Gandhi were submerged in the conflux of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā just at the time of the mela and likewise last year, those of Jawaharlal Nehru born in Allahabad. Under the patronage of scientific institutions literature is constantly edited , the authors of which see in the Kumbha Mela a symbol of eternal spiritual values of India and mankind. They bow before the supernatural authority of the *sādhus* and, from the position of boundless faith, they have only a smile of pity for everybody, who view all this with eyes of reason and realism. And so, this unique religious festivity, which emerged from the ground of Hinduism becomes too a barometer, indicating the development of contemporary India from her past into the future.

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# Prayāga and its Kumbha Mela

## Giorgio Bonazzoli

### Introduction

A big gathering of people and religious fair (mela) takes place every year in the month of Māgha (Jan.-Feb.) at Allahabad or Prayāga at the confluence of the Yamunā and the Gaṅgā. There at the exact point where the two streams of different colour mix their waters and a third river, the Sarasvatī, joins them in the depth of the earth, according to Hindu tradition[1], millions of people perform their religious rites of purification (Māghasnāna). These three streams (= Triveṇī), though having different qualities or characteristics when they flow separately[2], have a powerful effect in relation to *mokṣa,* once they join :

> "If one bathes and drinks water where there are the Gaṅgā, Yamunā and Sarasvatī enjoys *mukti;* there is no doubt."
>
> *Padma P.*, VI. 23.14.

> "O Yudhiṣṭhira, there will be no rebirth, even in hundred of crores of Kalpas, for those who bathe in the bright and dark waters (i.e. Gaṅgā and Yamunā) in the month of Māgha."
>
> *Matsya P.*, 107.7.

The sacred place is not restricted, of course, to the mere topographical junction of the rivers, but it extends to their banks as well and to the town itself, so that the whole of Prayāga is considered a *tīrtha*, normally known as Tīrtharāja (king of the *tīrthas*). The Māghasnāna at Prayāga is particularly momentous every twelve years, when it gets the name of Kumbhaparvan or Sādhumelā because on that occasion a huge number of sādhus gather from all over India for a sacred dip in the Saṁgama or Triveṇī.

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## Prayāga Māhātmya in the Purāṇas

The *Tristhalīsetu* of Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa (sixteenth century) while speaking of Prayāga, quotes from 15 Mahāpurāṇas; but not all of them indeed contain a Prayāga Māhātmya; other topics, like Māgha Māhātmya, Tīrthayātrā, Karmakāṇḍa, etc. are also dealt with. Mention of Prayāga anyway can be found in several Purāṇas, besides, of course, in *Rāmāyaṇa* II. 54 and in *Mahābhārata* III. 83.65-87; XIII. 25. 35-37.

The Purāṇas more conspicuously dealing with Prayāga are the *Matsya*, *Padma*, *Nāradīya*, *Skanda*, *Kūrma* and *Agni*, which partly correspond with those more often quoted by Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa. From the quotations in the *Krityakalpataru* of Lakṣmīdhara Bhaṭṭa, which mentions only the *Mahābhārata* and the *Matsya*, we conclude that possibly the most ancient text on Prayāga Māhātmya in the Purāṇas is the one available in the *Matsya*. The statement has to be specified in the sense that we do not exactly know whether in the *Krityakalpataru's* time (twelfth century) other Purāṇas contained also a Prayāga Māhātmya or the *Matsya* simply was the most extensive on that topic or the most famous and therefore the only worthy to be quoted. Moreover, from the ancientness of the Prayāga Māhātmya in the *Matsya* we have not to be easily drawn to conclude that the other Purāṇas are necessarily indebted to it. Subjects of such importance as Tīrthayātrās and Tīrtha Māhātmyas could easily develop independently in different places, specially in times when pilgrimages played a great role in the religious life of the masses. The Prayāga Māhātmyas, however, at present available in the Purāṇas are interrelated at least to some extent.

If we collate the *Matsya Purāṇa* 103-111 with the *Svargakhaṇḍa*, 41-49 of Mora ed. and the corresponding *Ādi khaṇḍa* 41-49 of ASS ed. of the *Padma Purāṇa*, we get an almost exact correspondence, as seen in Table no. 1.

Table 1

| *Matsya P.* ( Mora. ed. ) | | *Svargakhaṇḍa of Padma P.* ( Mora ed.) | | *Ādikhaṇḍa of Padma P.* ( ASS ed.) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Adhyāya | Ślokas | Ślokas | Ślokas | Adhyāya |
| 103 | 19 | 22 | 21 | 41 |
| 104 | 22 | 24 | 24 | 42 |
| 105 | 56 | 57 | 56 | 43 |
| 106 | 21 | 22 | 21 | 44 |
| 107 | 34 | 35 | 34 | 45 |
| 108 | 25 | 27 | 25 | 46 |
| 109 | 19 | 20 | 20 | 47 |
| 110 | 14 | 15 | 14 | 48 |
| 111 | 22 | 17 | 17 | 49 |
| 9 | 232 | 239 | 232 | 9 |

That shows that the text in all the cases is the same. From the evidence of the *Krityakalpataru* which quotes only from the *Matsya,* and from the pre-eminence given to the *Matsya* even in the *Tristhalīsetu,* we can safely deduce that *Padma* 41-49 is indebted to *Matsya* 103-111. The relation, on the contrary, between the *Matsya* and the *Padma,* as far as the *adhyāya* 102 of the *Matsya* is concerned, is more complex. The 25 *ślokas* of this *adhyāya,* indeed, have been increased to 77 in the *Svargakhaṇḍa* and divided into two *adhyāyas* and to 62 in the *Ādikhaṇḍa,* so as to include also the text of the *Mahābhārata* III. 83, *Kūrma* and *Agni.* In this respect the *Padma's* Prayāga Māhātmya seems to be later than all the other Purāṇas from which it was borrowed.

The same conclusion is reached if we consider the *Padma's* Māgha Māhātmya. The Prayāga Māhātmya crept into the *Padma* through the mediation of the Māgha Māhātmya, although Māgha and Prayāga were really distinct as the following two *ślokas* unmistakably prove :

> "The merit acquired by men by means of restraining in ten years at Puṣkara, Kurukṣetra, Brahmāvarta, Prithūdaka, Avimukta, Prayāga and at the confluence of the Gaṅgā with the sea, is

gained through a three-day bath in the month of Māgha, no doubt".

*Padma P.* (ASS), VI. 211.69-70;
*Nār. P.*, II. 31.25-36, specially śl. 35.

Yet as Māghasnāna was particularly renowned at Prayāga, the Purāṇa, dealing with Māgha, was somehow dragged in describing also Prayāga itself. In fact, both the recessions of the *Padma* contain a Māghasnāna Māhātmya,[3] incorporating a Prayāga Māhātmya, but the Mora ed. has 783 śl. distributed in 6 *adhyāyas*, of which only 297 (or more properly only 171) are devoted to Prayāga; the ASS has 32 *adhyāyas* on Māgha, of which only 7 *adhyāyas* and 570 śl. deal with Prayāga properly. Besides, from the difference in the numbers of the *ślokas*, it appears that the text is only partially similar in the two recessions and therefore the Prayāga Māhātmya, contained in them, is not original but is due to later additions.

Borrowing and enlarging, it is known, are two of the normal processes in the Purāṇic compositions, which take place more easily and often when a bardic tradition with its cadences and refrains is still very vivid.[4] But our topic, although full of borrowings, seems to be only slightly influenced by bardic tradition. We can, therefore, say that besides the bardic tradition the subject itself, specially when it appeals to a great portion of the population, as is the case with the Tīrtha Māhātmyas, can be a strong incentive to borrowing and enlarging, even if-as seems to be here the case-the tradition is not prevalently bardic, but mainly written.

Indebted to the *Matsya Purāṇa* but at the same time to the *Mahābhārata* and bardic tradition, seem to be the *Agni* and *Kūrma Purāṇas.*

Completely independent instead appear the *Nāradīya* and the *Skanda*, although in them too *ślokas* can be found that are common with the previous Purāṇas and most probably belonging to the bardic tradition.

Special attention deserve *adhyāya* 58 and 71 of the *Avantīkhaṇḍa (Skanda Purāṇa), where the main innovation is that Prayā*ga is interpreted as, or better substituted by Prayāgeśvara : In II. 58.22-23, Kanyā says :

> "Thus, O best among kings, I went to the desirable *tīrtha* Prayāga saluted by all the gods and did there an extremely arduous penance, then, O lord of the princes, Prayāga himself came in visible form".

In these śl. is evident the effort to elevate or spiritualize the goal of a pilgrimage. An equivalent effort, although on another line, is made by the *Brahma Purāṇa, 25.2-3, 6 :*

> "He, who has hands, feet, mind well controlled, gets the merits of a *tīrtha*, i.e. knowledge, penance, fame.
>
> Man's pure mind is a *tīrtha*, and the restraining of voice and senses as well. These *tīrthas* belonging to the body make acquainted with the way to heaven.
>
> Wherever a man reduces to subjection his senses there is Kurukṣetra, Prayāga and Puṣkara".

In the other Purāṇas too this spiritual aspect, although not so much stressed, is often kept in mind.[5] Lakṣmīdhara among the Nibandhakāras, stresses the real significance of a *tīrtha*. It is not simply to step on the stones of the *ghāṭas* or to take a dip into the water of a river, but to meet God himself or to encounter that special form of God which can be only experienced in his correspondent *tīrtha*. The importance of a *tīrtha* is so stressed and the pilgrimage acquires the value of a spiritual urgence.[6]

By way of general remark one could object that the Māhātmyas do not enter in the *pañcalakṣaṇa* scheme traditional to the Purāṇic arrangement and therefore they are illegitimate or apocryphal. Whether that is a sound conclusion or a mere prejudice, has to be seriously considered. I have already stated that the Māhātmyas spoken of here are integral parts of the Purāṇas and not appendices to them like e.g. the Pañcakrośī Māhātmya or Kāśī Māhātmya, attached to the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa,*[7] i.e. they have been accepted and incorporated in the main body of the Purāṇa. Now, what has been proved by S.H. Levitt,[8] namely that the first time we find in the literature the compound 'Purāṇa-pañcalakṣaṇa', i.e. in the *Amarakośa,* the word does not refer to the later traditional five topics (*sarga, pratisarga,* etc.), but to a group of subjects, one of which were the

Purāṇas, should be already a first call to prudence while judging the legitimacy of the *pañcalakṣaṇa* and other topics. Moreover, the ancient definition of Purāṇa-*purā navam bhavati*,[9] which can be understood as an exigence to renewal inherent to the Purāṇic structure, signifies that no topic is really permanent and fixed in such books, but is subjected to continuous evolution. I think that we possess already enough proofs to say that topics other than the *pañcalakṣaṇa* were the subjects of the Purāṇas from the very beginning and that it is proper to the Purāṇic nature to incorporate always new topics by way of 'aggiornamento' to the different topographical, chronological or religious and social situations.[10] In this light I consider the Māhātmyas authentically and legitimately Purāṇic.

### Kumbha Mela

As we said in the beginning Prayāga is a place of particular attraction for pilgrims in the month of Māgha[11], so that whenever in the Purāṇas Prayāga is praised Māgha is also mentioned and wherever Māghasnāna is described very often also Prayāga enters in the picture. We have said, moreover, that Māghasnāna at Prayāga has a peculiar value every twelve years, on the occasion of the Kumbhaparvan.

The name 'kumbha' indeed does not refer to Prayāga alone, but to three other places also, namely Haridvāra, Ujjain and Nāsik, so that we have now to enlarge our field of research, both because other places enter into the picture and because the Purāṇas are of no use in this case as they do not contain any mention of a Kumbha Mela or Parvan.

To support the ancientness of the Kumbha Mela have been quoted by some paṇḍitas[12] a few passages from the Vedas, the two most striking being the following :

1. "I give four pitchers (*kumbha*), in four several places".
*Atharvaveda*, 4.34.7.

In which the four 'Kumbhas' in four places have been interpreted as the four localities where the Kumbha Mela takes place. But in fact, on a closer examination, it is not difficult to discover how the text has been simply adapted to signify the Kumbha Mela by separating it from the context. The full verse indeed runs :

> "I give four pitchers, in four several places, filled to the brim with milk and curds and water."

The verse, which belongs to a hymn in glorification of a certain sacrifice called Viṣṭārī, is commented by Sāyaṇa in the following way:

> "Four *kumbhas* full of ingredients like milk, etc.
> '*caturdhā*, i.e. in four ways according to the division of the directions, east, etc.
> '*dadhāmi*', i.e. I put in the quarters."[13]

We have to suppose therefore that not even in Sāyaṇa's time such verse was connected with Prayāga and the Kumbha, although in his age Tīrthayātrās were very common. So, we have to deduce that the previous adaptation is quite recent and possibly restricted to small circles.

2. "On Time is laid an overflowing beaker (= Pūrṇa Kumbha) : this we behold in many a place appearing. He carries from us all these worlds of creatures. They call him Kāla in the loftiest heaven." *Atharvaveda*, 19.53.3.

Here "Pūrṇa Kumbha" which even according to the commentary of Sāyaṇa refers to 'Time', as the whole hymn is dedicated to him, is understood as signifying the Pūrṇa Kumbha every twelve years as distinct from the Ardha Kumbha every six years.[14]

Although the interpretation of the scriptures given in a particular epoch by the faithful has to be considered legitimate, yet I doubt how many persons are ready to accept the proposed meaning of the quoted verses, when it is so removed from the original sense of the scriptures and when even Sāyaṇa did not mention it, though he usually superimposes the interpretation of his own times on the basic meaning of the Vedas.

More attention instead deserve *Ṛgveda khila*-no. 22,[15] even if it draws our attention of Prayāga more than on the Kumbha. It says :

> "Those people who having bathed where *the bright and dark rivers* meet, resolute, abandon indeed their body, ascend to heaven and enjoy immortality".

The reference to Prayāga, if not to the Kumbha, in the way common to the Purāṇas, is clear and striking, all the more since it seems to be the only place in the Vedas, where it is recorded. As it has been noted, the *khilas,* as their very name leads us to think, are to be considered later than the bulk of the Saṁhitās themselves. How much later, however, is still a question to be determined. Anyway, as this verse is the only mention of Prayāga, the solution remains uncertain. We can only say that it was written when Tīrthayātrās were already common and that at present we have no sure records about such *yātrās* being a religious feature of the Vedic age, although even in the Saṁhitās *tīrthas* are mentioned.[16]

Two Upaniṣads also contain a clear mention to Prayāga. The *Śivopaniṣad* 6. 192 says :

> "Prayāga is the desired *tīrtha,* it is the highest Avimukta. It is recognized as Śrīparvata' and bestowing perfection in this world and in the other".

The *Jābāladarśanopaniṣad* 4.49 says :

> "Kurukṣetra is in the place of the breast, Prayāga is in the lotus-like heart, Cidambaram is in the middle of the heart, Kamalālaya is in *mūlādhāra*".

The themes of these Upaniṣads are so alien from the classical ones that hardly one can accept that they should be even styled 'Upaniṣads' at all. Their insistence on *tīrthas* on the other hand reveals that they were written when the practice of Tīrthayātrā was well established and developed. We can even think that they were written to give a kind of official 'philosophical' approval to the practice of pilgrimages, a process which is not unusual.

Leaving, therefore, the Vedas because their evidence, if any, is quite irrelevant and not conducive to any reasonable conclusion, we come to other sources, the most conspicuous of which is the testimony of Hsüan Tsang, Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, who travelled through India in the seventh century CE at the time of Mahārāja

Harṣa. Although he does not mention the Kumbha Mela, he speaks of a big tree near a temple at the feet of which people used to commit suicide, he mentions also the religious suicide in the holy waters of the Saṁgama.[17] In his time, therefore, Prayāga was considered a particularly sacred place having some of the features described also in the Purāṇas. His disciple, Shaman Hwui Li, even more than Hsüan Tsang himself, stresses the great gatherings that took place just at the Saṁgama, in the place called the 'great charity enclosure' because there kings showed their generosity by distributing goods to different classes of people.[18] With all that anyway no mention of a mela called Kumbha. The only thing we can deduce from these descriptions is that Prayāga was already a famous place where people used to gather in great number.

From the seventh century CE the interest in such periodical religious gathering went on increasing. We can assume that it reached its climax in the Middle Ages, when Tīrthayātrās were given great importance.

Tradition says that Śaṅkara has been the pioneer of the Kumbha Mela at Prayāga, by transforming it from a gathering of single group and of local significance only into a pan-Indian meeting of akhāḍās or maṭhas (i.e. sādhus, svāmins, etc.) and extending it to the above mentioned four places.[19] But other stories are also common among people. Some say that the interval of 12 years is due to the fact that the congregation of the Maharṣi Sanaka, Sanandan, etc. used to take place after such a number of years at Haridvāra and Prayāga. Others maintain that, as special practices had to be performed by yogins every twelve years, they began to gather at Haridvāra, etc. to get facilities in their yogic practices. Others, at last, claim that this mela has to be traced back to Buddhists who had their *dharmapariṣads* or *vīraṣat*-meetings for succession from time to time.[20] None of these traditions, however, can be supported by written records.

A little more can be said about the name of 'kumbha'. Of this name applied to the gatherings at Haridvāra, Prayāga, etc., there are two different traditions : one that can be called 'purāṇic' though at present not available in the printed editions of the Purāṇas and the other that can be styled as 'jyautiṣa' or astrological. The distinction between the two, however, is not sharp and nothing prevents thinking that they underwent reciprocal influence or even that at the beginning they were indeed only one.

The Purāṇic tradition is in relation to the churning of the ocean (*kṣīra-samudra-manthanam*). It is said - a tradition which is common among people[21]–that when Garuḍa was carrying the *amṛta kumbha* from the recently churned sea to Viṣṇuloka to give it to the devas he stopped at Haridvāra, Prayāga, Ujjain and Nāsik and for that reason such places began a regular celebration of the Kumbha Mela. I could not find any text supporting this *kathā*.[22] Another version of it is attached to the *Skanda Purāṇa,* although no printed edition of such Purāṇa has at present these *ślokas*. As this is the only *supposed* Purāṇic source for the origin of the Kumbha Mela, it is worth reading it.[23]

> [1] "And now I shall tell the excellent appearance of the *kumbha*. In the northern side of the Himālaya there is a sea whose name is Kṣīroda (= milk-ocean).
>
> [2] Once there the devas and dānavas began the churning of the ocean. They put (the mountain) Mandara as churning-stick, (the serpent) Vāsuki as string to whirl round the churning-stick.
>
> [3] Established the tortoise (Kūrma) at the bottom and Viṣṇu's arms on the Mandara. All the devas stood on one side and those who had Bali as their head ( = dānavas) on another side.
>
> [4] There, when this Kṣīroda, the best of the oceans, was churned, first of all poison appeared, which was eaten by Śambhu (= Śiva).
>
> [5] Now, when the world reached its full welfare, were produced there those that today are called great jewels.
>
> [6] First the excellent self-moving aerial car (= Vimāna Puṣpaka, having a swan for conveyance), the elephant Airāvata and the tree Pārijāta (= the coral tree or Erythrina indica).
>
> [7] And among them Rambhā, excellent in dancing, playing on the *vīṇā*, and the best gem called Kaustubha and also the waxing Moon.

[8] Ear-rings and a bow, and the five auspicious cows as well, namely, Lakṣmī, Surūpā, Yamunā, Suśīlā and Surabhi.

[9] Uccaiḥśravā sprang up together and Lakṣmī having beautiful complexion and the deva Dhanvantari, Viśvakarman conversant with arts.

[10] And a pitcher was produced shining in Dhanvantari's hands, full with nectar up to the brim, attracting indeed everybody's mind.

[11. 12] Jayanta, of great power and strength, having seen the pitcher come forth out of the compassion of the lotus-like foot of the invincible (= Viṣṇu), produced by the agitation of the ocean of milk, having the best of the jewels at its top, instigated by the devas took immediately the nectar and ran away.

[13] Then the daityas, distressed by the sights of the Nāga (Vāsuki), having considered thoroughly the action of the devas, informed by Śukra, chief priest of the daityas.

[14] Went following on his heels. He, been pressed, afraid, ran away in the ten directions, for 12 days and nights.

[15] The nectar was taken by the daityas out of his hand and again (recovered) by him. They angrily quarrelled, 'I will drink it first'; 'Not you'.

[16] While the descendants of Kaśyapa were thus discussing for the seizing of the nectar, the Lord having bewildered them by means of Mohinī distributed the nectar.

[17] In whatever place of the earth the pitcher fell during the quarrelling of the descendants of Kaśyapa, there then is called Kumbhaparvan.

[18] The pitcher, which was made to fall by the daityas who had their spirits seized by quarrel, urged by Śukra, was protected by Guru (= Jupiter), Indu = (= Moon), Arka (= Sun) and his son (= Saturn).

[19] The Moon gave protection from flowing forth, the Sun from breaking, Jupiter from the daityas, Saturn from the fear of Devendra's son (= Jayanta).

[20] In the year in which there is a conjunction of the Sun, Moon and Jupiter in that (Kumbha) constellation, there is the Kumbhaparva in the place where the *kumbha's* nectar had fallen; in no other occasion.

[21] As 12 days of the devas are 12 years of the mortals, so the Kumbhaparvan are 12 by number.
(And the 12 Kumbhaparvans derive from the 12 days of the devas i.e. twelve years of the mortals).

[22] Four Kumbhas are known here in the land of Bharata for the removal of men's sins and eight in the other world approachable by devas and not by others.

[23] The man, who goes to them (Kumbhaparvans) during the conjunction, partakes in the immortality. The devas bow down to those who are there, as the poor bow down to the rich.

[24] The division of the Kumbhayoga on earth is fourfold, at Viṣṇudvāra (= Haridvāra), Tīrtharāja (= Prayāga), Avantī ( = Ujjain), Godāvarī's bank (= Nāsik). It is known as Kumbhaparvan because drops of nectar were thrown".

The *kathā* is an 'aition' in which only a Purāṇic reason is given for the name of 'kumbha' and for the selection of the four places in which the mela is celebrated, but where an attempt is made (śl. 18-21) to give also an astronomical support for such an extraordinary gathering in those places. Śl. 22 may hint at the different importance the mela is said to have at special intervals, say after 24, 96 or 144 years, although the most current divisions about its importance are the Ardha Kumbha, every six years and the Pūrṇa kumbha every twelve years. But of this division there is no mention in the above quoted text.

The astrological tradition of the Kumbha is instead more complex. There are two series of texts, both ascribed to the *Skanda*

*Purāṇa*, although not traceable in the printed editions, one referring to Haridvāra and the other to Prayāga. For Haridvāra the traditional *ślokas* run as follows[24] :

*padminīnāyake meṣe kumbharāśigate gurau /*
*gaṅgādvāre bhavedyogaḥ kumbhanāmā tathottamaḥ //*
*vasante viṣuve caiva ghaṭe devapurohite /*
*gaṅgādvāre ca kumbhākhyaḥ sudhām eti naro yataḥ //*

"When the Sun is in Meṣa (= Aries) and Jupiter in Kumbha (= Aquarius), then that is a great *yoga* called Kumbha at Gaṅgādvāra. When Jupiter is in Kumbha at Spring's equinox it is called Kumbha at Gaṅgādvāra, from which a man gets immortality."

For them then the conjunction (*yoga*) called Kumbha derives its name from Jupiter being in Kumbharāśi (= Aquarius), while the Sun can be in Meṣa (= Aries). The Hindi *Śabdasāgara* [25]s.v. Kumbha writes:

"(Kumbha) is the name of a *parvan* (= auspicious day) which arrives on every twelve years. On this occasion a great religious fair takes place at Haridvāra. That *parvan* is called Kumbha because it takes place when the Sun is in Kumbha."

According to this text, the *yoga* gets its name from *the Sun being in Kumbha*. Although they differ in fixing the celestial body that should be in Kumbharāśi, yet the above texts agree in establishing that for having the Kumbhayoga one of the celestial bodies should be in the Kumbharāśi.

For Prayāga it is said[26] :

*meṣarāśigate jīve makare candrabhāskarau /*
*amāvāsyā tadā yogaḥ kumbhākhyas tīrthanāyake //*
*makare ca divānāthe hyajage ca brihaspatau /*
*kumbhayogo bhavettatra prayāge hyati durlabhaḥ //*

"When Brihaspati (= Jupiter) is in Meṣa, the Moon and the Sun in Makara (= Capricornus) and it is *amāvāsyā*, then the *yoga* is called Kumbha at Tīrtharāja. When the Sun is in Makara (=

> Capricornus) and Brhaspati in Aries, then there is a Kumbhayoga, difficult to have at Prayāga".

In these *ślokas*, ascribed to the *Skanda Purāṇa*, the Kumbhayoga is not connected with celestial bodies being in Kumbharāśi. Therefore, there seems to be no apparent reason why such conjunction should be styled Kumbha at all. The Purāṇas on the other hand, while speaking of the Māghasnāna at Prayāga, are unanimous in saying that the Sun should be in Makara[28] and never mention a *yoga* called Kumbha. Indeed, they seem to repeat a bardic refrain when they write-*makarasthe ravau māghe* or similar[29], without having any real concern for the astrological position of the planets.

If we now compare the astronomical conjunction as described for the Kumbha at Haridvāra and as described for Prayāga, it appears that the name Kumbha fits the former and is out of place for the latter. It seems, therefore, that the Kumbha Mela gets its name from a big gathering that used to take place at Haridvāra every twelve years on the occasion of a particular conjunction of planets, one of which was in Kumbharāśi. When such a big gathering was extended also to other places, the particular conjunction that takes place on such occasions was called also Kumbha, even though no celestial body was in Kumbharāśi. The passage on *Kumbhotpatti*, I have quoted from the *Skanda Purāṇa* calls Kumbha the conjunction of the Sun, Moon, and Jupiter in Kumbharāśi (śl. 18-21), without specifying in which place the Kumbha should then take place. Anyway, even if this tradition is common also among people, it does not seem to apply to any of the Kumbha Melas actually celebrated.[30]

As for the period of this fair there are two different views. "Some are of opinion that the Kumbhayoga happens regularly after a period of 12 solar years. Others hold that unless some particular astronomical factors come into existence the fair cannot be held. These scholars boldly assert that Kumbha fair may be celebrated even in the 11th year after the holding of one Kumbha. It is further stated that the factor *saṁkrānti* is not essential in determining the Kumbhayoga; it is Brihaspati's association with Siṁha which is the principal factor for this determination. There is still another view that in such matters as the Kumbhaparvan it is not the position of the *grahas* (= planets) that counts, but the consideration of *varṣa*, *māsa* and *tithi* (i.e. year, month, lunar day). Whether the Kumbha is a *varṣa-parvan* or not is still to be determined."[31]

I can conclude the whole topic of the Kumbha Mela with the following words of one of the most authoritative paṇḍitas of Benares:

> "The foregoing discussion reveals that the fair is not an ancient one. Owing to its non-mention in the Purāṇic and allied works we are led to think that it has been purposely grafted on some religious congregation used to be celebrated on certain holy days. Some scholars do not regard it as a *parvan* but a bath (*snāna*) only ... The origin of the Kumbha fair seems to lie in the notion of holiness of this (Māgha's) bath at Prayāga. To be explicit : A certain religious bath used to be celebrated at Prayāga in the month of Māgha from the hoary past. This gradually gained the form of fair and the promulgators of the Kumbha fair utilized this pre-existing fair to serve their purpose. It is these promulgators who seem to have given the name Kumbha to this fair ... It may also be accepted that a fair of catholic nature like the Kumbha (but not named Kumbha) was started at Prayāga in the month of Māgha, even before the Kumbha fair at Haridvāra came into existence ... The view that the Kali era started from the full moon day of Māgha (vide *Puruṣārthacintāmaṇi*, p. 87) also seems to have led persons to hold a popular fair like Kumbha in Prayāga ... It appears that the name Kumbha was given to this fair at Prayāga afterwards the name of the Kumbha fair (named after the Kumbharāśi) at Haridvāra."[32]

The unknown facts, therefore, are more numerous than those which are known. It seems that there could be much scope for some scholars in looking for the origin of this so great a fair.

In order to give an idea of what takes place during the Kumbha Mela, I shall now gather some notes on the pilgrimage to Prayāga; that will be the best description of the celebrations for the Kumbha, although the rules laid down here do not apply only to the Kumbha, but to any pilgrimage to Prayāga.

## A Pilgrim Guide to Prayāga

I now give, in a more discursive way, some rules for the pilgrims who intend to accomplish their religious duty to go to Prayāga. To prepare the following pilgrim-guide I kept in mind specially the following works, namely the *Prayāga Māhātmya*, which claims to be attached to the *Matsya Purāṇa*, because it can be considered a witness to the oldest Purāṇic tradition on Prayāga; the *Prayāga Māhātmya Śatādhyāyī* (Ś.), because it is the most complete treatise on the subject and seems to have been written after Akbar; the article "Prayag or Allahabad" which reproduces the usages relating to the Kumbha Mela at the beginning of this century; and the *Kumbhaparva Māhātmya*, which is a conspicuous representative of the living tradition. Besides these, I have always in mind also P.V. Kane's *History of Dharmaśāstra* which in the case of Prayāga faithfully follows the *Tristhalīsetu*, a sixteenth century pilgrim-guide to the three most famous *tīrthas* in northern India, and contains many references to other works as well.

**On the way :** Before laying down the rules for a pilgrimage, we should ask who can undertake a Tīrthayātrā, i.e. who are the persons eligible for, entitled for, or capable (= *adhikārī*) of a pilgrimage. The problem, already discussed at length by P.V. Kane[33] need not detain us very long. The eminent author's conclusion that 'Tīrthayātrā was a popular way for redemption of sins in the case of *all classes* of men and women'[34] can be accepted, all the more that the same conclusion can be partly drawn from reading Ś. 38. 9-17. The only interesting peculiarity of this Māhātmya in comparison with what is stated in other works is its affirming that the *jñānins* need not go for Tīrthayātrās. The Ś. 38.17 says :

*dvandvasaṅgavimuktānām brahmadhyānaikacetasām /*
*saṁvidātīrthabhūtānām na tīrthagamanam matam //*

> "For those who are free from attachment to the opposite sex, who have their spirits unified in the meditation of Brahman, who have become conscious *tīrthas*, going for a *tīrtha* has no purpose."

On the other hand we know from other sources that the merit of pilgrimage can be realized in a *vicarious manner* as it is hinted at in the *Krityakalpataru's Tīrthavivecanakāṇḍa*, p. 11 :

*ṣoḍaśāṁśam sa labhate yaḥ parārthena gacchati /*
*ardham tīrthaphalam tasya yaḥ prasaṁgena gacchati //*

> "He, who goes for money from another, gets one sixteenth of merit he, who goes while bent on another purpose, has half of the fruits from a *tīrtha*".

So, there seems to be no strict necessity of going on a pilgrimage. Those who are entitled to do a Tīrthayātrā and have decided to start for the pilgrimage should follow a particular ritual, which is largely described by P.V. Kane[35]. Here I lay down only the special rules for going to Prayāga, even if they partly tally with the general ones.

According to the *Prayāga Māhātmya*, a pilgrim who starts for Prayāga should shave his head, fast and perform a *śrāddha* (= ancestral rites) of *ghee* (= butter) on the first day; every day of his journey he should bathe and remain controlled and *brahmacārī* (=celibate), travel without shoes, upper garment, and turban. No use should be made of any conveyance, because conveyance destroys half the merit; but if he cannot avoid it, he may go as he can; only he should remember Hari with devotion, as this is the only way of getting the fruits of the Tīrthayātrā.[36]

According to the *Śatādhyāyī* (38.30 ff), one should fix the date of the pilgrimage following the prescriptions of the *pañcāṅga* (almanac) and the *śāstras*; on the the first day one should eat only once; on the second day one should eat only sacrificial food; on the third day one should fast and shave; on the fourth day, after bath and daily duties, one should offer a *pūjā* to Gaṇeśa and to his fauvorite deity (=*iṣṭa devatā*); then after having selected the deities of one's journey, one should perform a *śrāddha* of *ghee*, give food to deserving brāhmaṇas, put on the special dress called *kārpaṭī* and recite the *saṅkalpa* (= declaration of intention). One should then take leave of the elders and go out of the village at an auspicious time. Having made a turn around the village, the pilgrim should then eat the *ghee* and the other items used in the *śrāddha*. Every day he should take his bath, which he will repeat any time he touches anything that had to be avoided[37], do his daily duties, keep morally irreprehensible behaviour, eat only once a day, sleep on the floor, without putting any shoes and turban and carrying arms. If someone becomes impure on the way, one should stop three days and then continue one's journey. If a pilgrim has recited the *saṅkalpa* and is obliged to interrupt his journey, he should perform a *prāyaścitta* (= expiation rites). If one dies on the way, one will be considered as a *ṛṣi* (sage). The journey should be completed on foot if one wants to get all the fruits of one's pilgrimage, but even if one has to use some conveyance, at least two *yojanas* should be covered on foot. The conveyance itself should be no cart hauled by cows otherwise the pilgrim becomes a cow-slayer; no bullock cart because in this case only half of the merit will be gained. If one cannot avoid conveyance one should use elephants, horses, men or boat. A pilgrim should travel barefooted, without umbrella, stick, etc. except when he is a *snātaka* (= initiated one).

**Prayāga** : The word 'Prayāga' is usually interpreted as composed of 'yāga' (= *yajña*, i.e. sacrifice) and 'pra', where 'pra' stresses the eminence of the efficacy of this *tīrtha* when compared with all the others and 'yāga' refers to the mythical sacrifice performed by Brahmā (Prajāpati) before creation, in which Prayāga, was the middle one of the *vedis*, the others being Kurukṣetra in the north and Gayā in the east.[38] Prayāga and its qualificative 'Tīrtharāja' are explained by the *Brahma Purāṇa* in the following way :

*prakriṣṭatvāt prayāgo asau prādhānyād rājaśabdavān* /

> "It is called Prayāga on account of its eminence and it has the word 'rāja' (in Tīrtharāja) applied to it on account of its being the chief."[39]

'The modern name of Allahabad was given to Prayāga by Akbar the Moghul Emperor, who built the fort that stands near the confluence of the two rivers. The date of construction is 1584 CE. The non-official alias of Prayāga was at first Ilahabas, half Arabic and half Sanskrit, meaning the Abode of God. Subsequently, Ilahabas was changed into Allahabad (=the city of God) by Shah Jahan. Allahabad became one of the many Subas into which the empire was divided by Akbar for administrative purposes'.[40] The Ś. 5-8.33 narrates a story, which is popular even nowadays, about the way in which Prayāga was selected as Tīrtharāja. The *kathā* says that when all the *munis, ṛṣis,* sādhus, ascetics, devotees, etc. went to Śeṣarāja to ask whether there was a 'rājā' among *tīrthas*, Śeṣarāja to prove that such a rājā existed, showed them a scale, on one pan of which he put the value of all the *pātālas*, parvatas, etc. and on the other the importance of the *saptapurīs* (or the seven sacred towns).[41] As the *saptapuris* turned the scale, he declared that the real reason of this was that among them there was Prayāga : all *tīrthas*, in fact, draw their significance from Prayāga like *jagat* (= this 'movable' world) derives its existence from Brahmāṇḍa (= the universe as Brahmā's egg). At a second weighing, indeed, in which Prayāga stood alone against all the others, the eminence and superiority of the Tīrtharāja was definitely proved.

Most of the Nibandhas and the Māhātmyas extol the greatness of this sacred city. Here only a small specimen can be given, taken out of thousands of *ślokas*. Some of the following *ślokas* here quoted from the *Prayāga Māhātmya* (PM, Veṅk. ed.) are traceable also in the *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas.

> "By seeing, touching, bathing at the junction of the Yamunā with the Gaṅgā as well as by serving and remembering it, a mortal becomes free from sin.
> Bewilderment produced in a hundred births disappears immediately. Therefore, your bewilderment comes to end by merely going there". PM, I. 55-56.

> "The worlds are enveloped by *adharma* and do not reach the highest goal.
>
> When one recalls Prayāga, O king, his slightest sin is completely destroyed.
>
> By seeing this *tīrtha*, even by mentioning its name or even by touching its earth, a man is freed from sin.
>
> The five *kuṇḍas* (are there), O best of kings, and in the middle of them there is the Gaṅgā; by merely seeing Prayāga immediately sin disappears.
>
> He, who remembers the Gaṅgā from one thousand of *yojanas*, even if he is an evil-doer obtains the supreme position.
>
> By mentioning it, one is freed from sin, seeing it one sees prosperity, by bathing and drinking one purifies ancestors up to the seventh generation.

> He who speaks truth and has also subdued anger, who is innocuous, not envious, follower of his duty, knower of truth, intent upon the good of cows and brāhmaṇas,
>
> By the very entering in the middle of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā immediately a mortal, even if he is addicted to doing sin, becomes sinless". PM, II. 13c-20.

> "Where one gets the desired wishes, where one is reborn, where the Sun's daughter, the goddess famous in the tree worlds, the illustrious river Yamunā joins, where the god Maheśvara is present just personally, at Prayāga, indeed, merit is acquired by men, O Yudhiṣṭhira".
>
> PM, II. 25-27a.

When we come to consider the topographical aspect of this town and try to identify the sub-*tīrthas* to which a pilgrim has to go in order to make his journey to Prayāga fructiferous, we are really overwhelmed by the huge number of *tīrthas* and the disagreement about their names in the texts we are studying. All our sources affirm that the *tīrthas* at Prayāga are innumerable and countless :

> "Also other *tīrthas* by hundreds of thousands dwelling at Prayāga (bestow) all the desires and merits" PM, IX. 49.

And when they venture to give their exact number, we get figures like 30 crores and 10 thousands or 60 crores. As to their names found in our sources, it is as if out of the hundred thousands of sacred places available at Prayāga, each author had chosen a few according to his own liking, with the result that the disagreement is almost total. Whether this difference in names in the sources should be considered the result of a change in the actual names of the *tīrthas* in course of time or as simply a process of magnification due to the desire of praising more and more the greatness of the city is difficult to say. The wisest thing to do would be either not to speak at all of the single *tīrthas* as P. V. Kane does[42], or limit our research to those places venerated even nowadays, as the *Modern Review* does, or again take only one text and try to identify the *tīrthas* described in it, as S. G. Kantawala[43] does. I shall try, instead, to find out the leading principle of such a selection in the names.

Prayāga is divided in all our texts in three parts, which P. V. Kane[44] clearly defines as : Prayāgamaṇḍala, Prayāga, Veṇī or Triveṇī. Prayāgamaṇḍala is said to be 5 *yojanas* long. Those who enter this maṇḍala get merits of an *aśvamedha* at every step.[45] Prayāga, called also Prajāpatikṣetra,[46] has well defined boundaries, i.e. Pratiṣṭhāna (modern Jhusi) at east, Bahumūlaka at south, Kambalāśvatara Nāgas at west and Vāsuki at north (on the northern end of Dārāgañj).

Veṇī or Triveṇī is long only 20 (Kane, IV. 599) or 30 (Ś. 34.1) *dhanuṣas*. According to Ś.34, it is of three types : a. near the Akṣayavaṭa it is *Mūlaveṇī*, b. where both the streams of Yamunā and Gaṅgā meet is *Madhyaveṇī*, c. as far as Someśvara is *Antyaveṇī*.

This would be the reason why the Veṇī is called Triveṇī. Ś. 34's interpretation is, however, different from the usual one which sees in the "Triveṇī" the *saṁgama* of the three streams (= Veṇī), namely Yamunā, Gaṅgā and Sarasvatī. According to the article entitled "Prayag or Allahabad" (p. 663), the 'holy of holies' is a triangular ground lying between the Akṣayavaṭa on its west side, the Pratiṣṭhānapurī on the east side and Alarkapurī (modern Arial) in the south. This Venī or confluence of the rivers is the most sacred and meritorious place in the world, it is called therefore the 'middle part of the earth' (= *jaghana*). [47] Triveṇī, in fact, can hint also at the three components of the sacred AUM, where 'A' stands for Śāradā and Pradyumna her God, 'U' for Yamunā and Aniruddha her God, and 'M' for Gaṅgā and Saṅkarṣaṇa her God.[48] Moreover, the three *kūpas* or five *kuṇḍas* (= pools) contained in it have a direct connection with the sacrifice which was performed here by Brahmā in the hoary past. Just sticking to this tradition Ś. 8.1 ff says that the territory of Prayāga is like an altar (= *vedi*) which can be subdivided into *antarvedi*, *madhyavedi*, *bahirvedi* - a division which tallies with the triple one given above, namely Prayāgamaṇḍala, Prajāpatikṣetra and Triveṇī.

All the numerous *tīrthas* of Prayāga are situated by our sources in this territory but in different way. While some seem to name them at random, the *Prayāga Māhātmya* divides and describes them according to their position in relation to the rivers Yamunā and Gaṅgā. A kind of unity is so given to all the *tīrthas* not only from a topographical but also from a logical point of view; the *tīrthas* indeed are not separate units, which happen to be in the same place, but are parts of a whole, i.e. Prayāga, which is supported and vivified by the two most sacred rivers.

A more elaborate arrangement is introduced by the *Śatādhyāyī*. The leading idea underlying the description of all the *tīrthas* at Prayāga is here the spatial one, i.e. the names are catalogued according to their succession in the cardinal points of the town. So, we have the list of the *tīrthas* belonging to the Indra-diśā, or belonging to the Agni-diśā, to Yama-diśā, etc. Thus, whenever a pilgrim turns his face in that space he can recall some *tīrthas*. He is in a way submerged by *tīrthas*. The image of being 'plunged into' a sea of *tīrthas* is not exaggerated. The Ś. itself seems to suggest it when in some place (Ś.75), while speaking of the temples dedicated to Mādhava, the tutelary deity of Prayāga, it says that besides a temple in each of the 8 directions, there is a temple also below the Akṣayavaṭa, i.e. in the depth of the earth and one in the Veṇīkṣetra, i.e. on the pole itself of the world. So, from this description one can deduce that the leading idea in enumerating the *tīrthas* is that the pilgrim should plastically become aware that at Prayāga he is in a completely sacred space; there he is realy at the centre of the ritual, temporal, spatial, philosophical sacredness. At Prayāga he does not simply plunge into sacred waters but into the sacredness itself. He joins Brahmā in his sacrifice, he can see Mādhava everywhere (in his temples), he is immersed into AUM. No wonder if he gets *mukti* there, not only for himself but for many of his kinsmen of past and future generations.[49] At Prayāga he reaches the depth of depths, the reality of realities, the truth of truths. This seems the message conveyed by the topographical description of Prayāga in our texts.

As it can be easily realized, it is impossible to say even a few words for each of the *tīrthas;* and also selecting the important ones is not an easy task.[50] I shall reduce my description to two *tīrthas* only, by all considered the most important, i.e. the Triveṇī or Veṇī, called also the *jaghana* of the world and the Akṣayavaṭa, which although no longer existing, has still a grip on the popular imagination and devotion. Not to enlarge too much the description, I shall limit my sources to the *Śatādhyāyī*.

## Triveni : *Māhātmya* : Ś. 35.6-14, 26-27, 32

[6] Śeṣa said : The seed (*bīja*) is the life of the *mantras* as life is of the living beings, so in the same way Triveṇī is the life of the *tīrthas*, increasing their strength.

[7] Venī gives the complete attainment of knowledge, the complete attainment of *mokṣa*; she is powerful giver of all success, a goddess; Triveṇī is to be always venerated.

[8] Veṇī destroys sins and increases merit every day, specially of the devotees who know what has to be done and what has not to be done.

[9] Kāśī is not like Veṇī, Gaṅgā is not like Veṇī. Nowhere, in any other *tīrtha*, there is a power (*śakti*) like Veṇī.

[10] This Veṇī is remembered as Kāmadhenu, as Kāmakalpalatā. Veṇī is renowned as the 8th town of *mokṣa* after the seven ones.

[11] She destroys the three kinds of conditions of existence, she destroys the three kinds of sins, she destroys all the faults in the three worlds; there is nobody similar to her anywhere.

[12] Sarasvatī with her *rajas*-quality, Yamunā with her *tamasa*-quality and Gaṅgā with her *sattva*-quality lead here (= at their confluence) to the *nirguṇa* Brahman.

[13] Gaṅgā is to be considered Viṣṇu's river because born of Viṣṇu's feet (and) Yamunā is born of Sūrya (Sun); their conjunction, is highly auspicious.

[14] Supreme happiness (I got) from approaching Triveṇī. My mind would not go to Pātāla nor even to heaven where there are all abundant enjoyments.

[26] Wherever I go (Triveṇī) is present, whatever I desire she bestows it.

[27] What is the use of going to those *tīrthas* that bestow fruits after much effort ? Triveṇī is to be honoured by all; she bestows *dharma*, *kāma*, *artha* and *mokṣa*.

[32] She was born of mountain Trikūṭa (= having three peaks); she is composed of three *guṇas;* she is made of three letters. She has three streams, each possessing one *mātrā*. She is attached to the god Śiva (one who has three eyes). Triveṇī is the staircase to Hari's feet. She is purifying, splendour of the three worlds, she wins the three worlds.

The Veṇī is *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa*, like Brahman[51], and she is identified with the Supreme God of Prayāga, Mādhava himself. To him and to her united as Veṇīmādhava a *pūjā* should be offered.[52] In several places we find prayers and *stutis* to her [53], that a pilgrim should keep in mind and recite while staying at Prayāga. The following are only some specimens :

***Dhyāna* : Ś. 35.33**

[33] He should recollect the three-coloured Veṇī, dressing in white, green and bright red clothes, three-eyed, carrying a good mace, followed by a succession of a conch, a lotus, a wheel, sitting on a seat of white lotus, having a *mālā* of Moons on her forehead, carrying a diadem, worthy to be praised by Brahmā, Rudra and Indra. He who remembers (her) during bath, taken three times, that man can get enjoyment and *mokṣa*.

***Stuti* : Ś. 35. 34-39**

[34] O you, who are saluted by Brahmā, Rudra, Indra, who are praised by all the Siddhas, who are connected with the mount Trikūṭa, O mother, salutation to you. Salutation.

[35] To you, O Veṇī, O you who abide in the middle of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā, who are inclined to conjunction, O winding tendril of indestructible *mokṣa*, salutation.

[36] O you, who are like a garland in the hand of Prayāga Tīrtharāja, you who give the fruit of the recitation of the immortal *mantras*, salutation.

> [37] O place of *dharma, artha, kāma* and *mokṣa*, famous in the world, you Veṇī, protect me, if I see you, or touch you or take a bath in you.
>
> [38] O you spoken of in all the Āgamas, O you bestowing the benefits of all the *tīrthas*, O Kalpalatā (= creeper granting all desires) of the living creatures, O mother Veṇī, salutation.
>
> [39] You are the Lakṣmī of *mokṣa*, you are super splendid, you are the *Suṣumnā*, you exist in all the active nerves, you are Brahmā's *māyā*, you have a various course, you have a visible form, salutation.

Brahmā knowing the greatness of Prayāga built here his *vedi* for the *aśvamedha* before creation.[54] So, Triveṇī is the ultimate cause of Prayāga's fame. As Triveṇī derives her name from the three rivers meeting at that point, so a pilgrim should recall the greatness, and praise the bounty of Gaṅgā, Yamunā and Sarasvatī, which are identified with the yogic Īḍā, Piṅgalā and Suṣumnā respectively.[55]

Besides the *māhātmyas* of the three rivers, we find also the *kathās* of their birth and the rules for their *pūjā* in the *Śatādhyāyī*. The most interesting is the *Yamunotpatti* (Ś. 89-91). *Gaṅgotpatti* instead is similar to the one found in many other books (Ś. 94-95). As for the *Sarasvatyutpatti* given in Ś. 96-97.11, Sarasvatī is described there not as a river but as Vāḍava's nurse, so the whole *utpatti* (origin myth) seems to be somewhat out of place.[56]

**Akṣayavaṭa** : The Akṣayavaṭa (Banyan tree) is the other centre of Prayāga. As it was cut down by Akbar around 1584, its description in our texts or its absence can constitute a good hint as to the time of their composition. So, the *Tristhalīsetu*, written in 1560 CE, mentions suicide by falling from the Akṣayavaṭa :

> "He who having approached the Vaṭamūla abandons his life, having passed through all the heavens, goes to Rudraloka."[57]

And so does also the *Prayāga Māhātmya*.[58] Both the texts, therefore, seem to have been composed at a time when suicide under the Vaṭa was still possible and encouraged.[59] Instead, the *Śatādhyāyī* does not mention any suicide at the Akṣayavaṭa's feet; it describes the tree (Vaṭamūla, Ś. 32.6) as being large 5 *yojan*as (Ś. 32.8) and with hyperbolic attributes.[60] This seems to signify that at *Śatādhyāyī's* time the Vaṭa did not exist and only a tradition was transmitted about it, which was already enlarged and somewhat transformed into a myth.

The Vaṭa's Māhātmya is described in the following passage (S. 72. 11-13, 40-44) : One day Brahmā's four children, Sanaka, etc. went to the Vaikuṇṭha, where they were asked by Viṣṇu what wonders they had seen in the universe. They answered that besides him the only wonder they had seen was a big Vaṭa at Prayāga :

> [11] A big tree five *yojanas* long having a hundred branches. His base is not visible, his roots reach the seven Pātālas.
>
> [12] The leaves are gold-coloured and the fruits sweet. The shadow resembles jewels and moreover it has no end.
>
> [13] At its base is seen a man, adorned with great splendour, great, four-handed, wearing garlands, having a dark complexion, dressed in yellow clothes.
>
> [40] By humble reverence to the Vaṭa one becomes dear to all the devas. By simply meditating on the Vaṭa, all (devas) are meditated on, there is no doubt.
>
> [41] In the middle of the sight of as many as 6 *kūlas* (= banks) of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā is Vaṭakṣetra; that is called *akṣaya*.
>
> [42] Salutation to the king of trees, O you who have the shape of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. Salutation to the one who resides in the seven Pātālas, and who is the bestower of various fruits.
>
> [43] Salutation to the one who has the form of a medicinal plant. Salutation to Māyā's husband. Salutation to you who help Mādhava to play in water with the help of moving leaves.
>
> [44] To the one who is the seed of the transitory mundane existence, and who is the giver of various fruits : salutation to you, salutation to you, salutation to you.

Near this tree Śiva dances and Mādhava also out of happiness joins him in his cosmic dance. Although creation is not explicitly mentioned in this context, it is not out of place to remember what the word dance implies in the Śaiva context and what has already been said about Brahmā's sacrifice to get creative power. The *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* (7.52) says that Hiraṇyagarbha has the shape of Vaṭa. So, from all this appears the centrality of the Akṣayavaṭa, even when most probably it had already disappeared.[62] It is, moreover, apparent how the author tries to draw the attention from the tree as a biological reality to Mādhava himself, its deity. The devotee is not requested to venerate the tree in itself but to unite its *pūjā* to the one performed to Mādhava by many gods.[63] So, even this *tīrtha* is interpreted in spiritual light according to the general tendency we have described above.

At Prayāga, besides the *tīrthas* there are also innumerable gods,[64] as the *Mahābhārata*, followed by all the Purāṇas, attests. Prayāga, therefore, should be conceived as a kind of *svarga*, or better a sum of *svargas*, where reside the gods and their devotees. At the same time Tīrtharāja is also the centre of the world, as we have seen, and the place which remains for ever, even at the time of the universal conflagration; there in fact resides Mādhava himself, the creator and Śiva, the destroyer. Prayāga is, therefore, the eternal point, source and end of all.

The holy *tīrtha*, moreover, is the means and the condition for *mukti.* [65] Gods and men, *tīrthas* and animals come here to disappear in the *mukti*, i.e. in Brahman. Prayāga, therefore, transcends itself, being the door through which every one has to pass to enter the unspeakable and unrepresentable *mokṣa*.

**Observances :** The pilgrim, who *bhaktipūrvaka* (=full of devoted faith), undertakes the pilgrimage to Tīrtharāja, once arrived has to follow a strict ritual and observances. He has not gone to Prayāga as a tourist but as hankerer after purification and *mokṣa*. The *Prayāga Māhātmyas*, give the details of what a devotee should perform in the holy city. The observances, of course, vary from book to book and from epoch to epoch, it would be therefore impossible here to follow all of them. I think that, if a choice has to be made, we should give particular importance to the most recent, because they prescribe practices which supposedly are still observed nowadays. I will, therefore, summarize what is prescribed in the *Śatādhyāyī*, in the article "Prayag or Allahabad" and the *Kumbhaparva Māhātmya*, which seem to be representative of the modern views.

The Ś. stresses first of all the need of undertaking the pilgrimage to Prayāga, because life is useless even if full of *tapas*, *vidyā* and richness, if one does not go to Tīrtharāja.[66] Going and remaining some days is extremely meritorious. Our books insist on the necessity of remaining at least one night or three nights.[67] The Ś. 36.23-48 speaks of the ways of remaining at Prayāga :

> "One day, three days, or also five days as well as seven days, a fortnight or a month or just a season (= 2 months), or three months, six months, a year by Mādhava's order : This is the so-called tenfold habitation following in regular order and he who lives an uninterrupted life out of *dharma* obtains the desired result : there is *mukti* in the eleventh habitation."
>
> Ś. 36.45-47.

Tradition has so much exalted the necessity of remaining one month at Prayāga that living there for such a period is described as giving the same merits as those acquired by Brahmā in his entire life (= *kalpa*); therefore *Prayāga-kalpavāsa* is praised and encouraged.[68] Although practices are prescribed for those who stay at Prayāga, yet living itself is meritorious :[69]

> "In this place the supreme *mukti* is obtained by those who think of me, without *jñāna*, without sense-restraining, without yoga, without *dhyāna*, without *vratas* and intense contemplation, without *dānas*, without wealth, without using fire, without *yajña*, without destroying the body, without *kṛichra*, *atikṛichra*, *parāka*, *taptakṛichra*, etc.[70], but by residing alone."
>
> Ś. 36.35-37.

This attitude fits well with the modern way of thinking, when the religious observances and faith are getting lower and lower. But it is not followed consequently in our books and the Ś. is in fact full of prescriptions to be strictly observed. Now and then, any how, the above mentioned attitude is resumed to mitigate the rules. This seems to signify that the Ś. has a spiritual understanding of the pilgrimage, i.e., it aims at something more than mere external practices and on the other it makes concessions to the people who found it difficult to follow all the prescriptions.

Once the pilgrim reaches the holy city he has first to prostrate completely (*sāṣṭāṅgapraṇāma*), then he should praise in turn the three rivers separately, the Akṣayavaṭa, the Mādhavakṣetra and has to give special honour to Bhairava and other gods. He has then to wash his hands, feet and face with water taken from the *tīrtha*, make twice *ācamana* and offer *arghya*. He should then take a bath with all his clothes on and make the *saṅkalpa*.[71] The rites are prescribed in full detail; the pilgrim is guided at every step and moment so that whatever he does may help him reach his goal. Particular attention in this context is given to the right moment of entering the town, fixed by astrology.[72] Once the pilgrim is inside the *tīrtha* he has to visit the holy places, eat only vegetables (so, avoid even sweets e.g.), remain *brahmacārī* and observe several practices. For clarity's sake I will gather whatever has to be done by him under the following topics :

***Snāna*** : Bath is the main item, to be taken at least three times a day and prescribed at any sub-*tīrtha*. It can be done either according to the usual rules, or with special prescriptions and special purpose laid down in our books. The most important baths are those to be taken on special occasions or *tithis* like Makarasaṅkrānti, Māgha kṛṣṇa caturthī, Dvādaśī, Caturdaśī, Amāvāsyā, Māgha śukla caturthī, Pañcamī, Aṣṭamī, Ekadaśī, Pūrṇimā (= Mahāmaghī).[73] But particularly meritorious are three days. Although not the same in all the books, they can be fixed as Makarasaṅkrānti, Amāvāsyā, Vasanta-pañcamī.[74] As the rules for Māghasnāna can be found in every Purāṇa dealing with such topics and in a hundred of booklets available in the market there is no need of setting them out here.[75] For the Kumbha Mela the following rules can also be observed.[76] The devotee, having reached the river, should make the shape of a *kumbha* (pitcher) with both his hands[77] and recall the nectar and in so doing he should bathe reciting the following *ślokas* :

*deva-dānavasaṁvāde mathyamāne mahodadhau /*
*utpanno asi tadā kumbhaḥ vidhrito viṣṇunā svayam //*

*tvat toye sarvatīrthāni devāḥ sarve tvayi sthitāḥ /*
*tvayi tiṣṭhanti bhūtāni tvayi prāṇāḥ pratiṣṭhitāḥ //*
*śivaḥ svayam tvam evāsi viṣṇus tvam ca prajāpatiḥ /*
*ādityā vasavo rudrā viśvedevāḥ sapaitrikāḥ //*
*tvayi tiṣṭhanti sarve api yataḥ kāmaphalapradāḥ /*
*tvat prasādād imam snānam kartum īhe jalodbhava /*
*sānnidhyam kuru me deva prasanno bhava sarvadā //*

Once the bath is over he should offer a *pūjā* to the *kumbha* and then offer according to his capacity one or four or eleven or 41 *kumbhas* full of *ghee* to brāhmaṇas.

***Dāna*** : The devotee is requested to present gifts not only after the Kumbhasnāna, but also on several other occasions. Ś. 53-64 deals with this topic at length. The *dānas* are divided into the following categories (Ś. 53.1-41) : dharmadāna, kāmadāna, lajjādāna, harṣadāna, abhayadāna, nitya-madhya-adhama-dāna, sāttvika-rājasika-tāmasika-dāna, dāna, atidāna, mahādāna, etc. Then some *dānas* are particularly prescribed : lakṣadīpadāna (Ś. 12. 45-54), sarvasvadāna (Ś. 61-62), kiñciddāna (Ś. 8. 11-64), phaladāna (Ś. 63. 1-15), daśadāna (Ś. 46. 22-36), tāmbūladāna (Ś. 63. 16-50), annadāna (Ś. 57. 9-47), godāna, called also mahādāna (Ś. 55. 28-56. 64), guptadāna (Ś. 58-60).[78]

For each of them special rules are laid down. As these divisions partly tally with the general rules for *dānas* as they appear in the literature on *dānas*,[79] we can consider these *adhyāyas* as well as the ones on *vratas*, *śrāddhas* and *pūjās*, as a summary of the common doctrine on those topics. Nowadays the rules and specially the practice have changed in most cases. Gift, such as described in our texts, are mainly meant for rich persons. For the common men only small presents can be afforded. Yet the basic rules remain the same. An interesting evolution of the Godāna is described in the article "Prayag or Allahabad" (p. 656) : 'The pilgrim makes his first small gift to the Prāgwāl when he offers his flowers and milk and coconut (if available–if not, its price in copper). The first two are poured unto the sacred stream. The fruit and the money go to the Paṇḍā. The pilgrim is also required to make a gift of a cow to his priest. But as every pilgrim cannot afford to give a cow, he goes through the ceremony nominally. A cow is brought, the pilgrim touches the tail of the animal and a *saṅkalpa* is recited by the Paṇḍā and the gift of the cow is thereby completed. A nominal price of the cow ... is paid to the cowman ... the remainder going to the Paṇḍā.'

This passage stresses the importance and the role of the priest at a *tīrtha*. There are, of course, several types of priests according to their functions. 'The priests who officiate at the ablutions and religious observances of the pilgrims at the Triveṇī are called Prāgwāls. The monopoly they enjoy of being the exclusive recipients of the gifts of pilgrims to Prayāga was granted by Akbar, according to a local tradition, to an ancestor of the Prāgwāls. It is said that the first attempts to lay the foundations of the fort were unsuccessful owing to the floods in the rivers in the rainy season. The sacrifice of a brāhmaṇa was the remedy suggested to avert the evil. A local Paṇḍā offered himself on condition that his clan should have the sole right of officiating as priests at the Triveṇī. After the human sacrifice the foundations defied the force of stream and the emperor ratified the grant to the representatives of the victim. In Hsüan Tsang's account mention is made of resident priests as being given preference over those who come from outside.'[80]

This description of the priests reminds one also of another important duty of a pilgrim and of almost all the devotees at the end of their practices, i.e. the feeding of the brāhmaṇas. The tradition is as old as the Vedas and, as is well known, is still practiced nowadays, even if on a small scale.

***Vrata*** : vows, more than any other observance, are extremely personal. Hinduism is based on *vratas*; so no wonder if even at Prayāga are prescribed or recommended some of them, which should help the pilgrim keep up his fervour and acquire new merits. Vratas are kept, of course, specially on particular *tithis*; so the list of *tithis* given above, can be considered also as a list of *vratas*. They are divided, as in all the treatises on the subject into 'nitya, naimittika, kāmya, nityakāmya'.[81] Special stress is laid on *ekādaśī*, a feature which is peculiar to several Purāṇas. As in our present days *ekādaśī* is one of the most popular *vratas*, specially among women.

I think the *kathā* of the *ekādaśī-utpati'* is of interest for understanding the Hindu attitude towards not only the *vratas* in general, but also the Tīrthayātrā in particular. The story, in fact, stresses that all rites a pilgrim performs, all vows he accomplishes derive their power from God himself, even if he seems to be outside the picture. Ekādaśī (personified) in this *kathā* could overcome the evil not by herself but by Viṣṇu's *śakti* and instrument. In the same way every *vrata* and every pilgrimage is not only a human effort towards purification or *mukti*, but is a divine power given to men by God himself for their salvation.

I should add here a word on religious suicide at Prayāga. But as this problem has, at present, almost only an historical value, I leave it.[82]

A particular *vrata*, which is performed specially at *tīrthas* is the *muṇḍana* (= shaving the hair), also for women.

***Śrāddha-pūjā-yajña*** : Other important ceremonies to be performed at Prayāga are *śrāddhas, yajñas*, and several *pūjās* like e.g. a *pūjā* with one lakh of flowers, the Dampattipujā, the Rudrānuṣṭhāna, etc.[83] The *pūjā* is nowadays the normal way of venerating a deity; it is, therefore, often prescribed in our sources. The aim of the *pūjās* and the items like *japa, dhyāna* joined to them, is the continuous plunging of the pilgrim into the religious world. Not a single moment spent at Prayāga should be left for profane activity. The pilgrim, whether he remains one day or one month, should always be in contact with God or his own ancestors, continuously engaged in performing religious ceremonies. Tīrtharāja is, therefore, transformed into a huge temple in which the devotee has to spend his time in full attention to gods who are its inhabitants. His hours and his steps are all marked by concrete acts of devotion. *Pūjās, japas, śrāddhas, muṇḍana*, baths, *dhyāna*, etc. are the actions in which he should be engaged at every instant. Really he has to transform his staying at Prayāga into a *kalpavāsa*, a kind of echo of Brahmā's life.

## Reading or Listening to the Purāṇas

A pilgrim at Prayāga should everyday recite or listen to some *kathā* taken from the Purāṇas; he should, of course, give preference to the *Prayāga Māhātmyas*. The author of the article "Prayag or Allahabad" in 1910 testifies to the practice of reading or hearing the *Prayāga Māhātmya*. He mentions the activities of 'professional paṇḍitas who have daily audiences of groups of men and women who listen to their *kathā*-recitations with the expositions, they deliver from their platforms' (p. 649). Such a practice is very common throughout the year also at Benares where devotees ask professional paṇḍitas to recite for them the greatness of Kāśī, almost always in the evening. In this context special mention deserves to be made to the prescriptions given in the *Śatādhyāyī* about the recitation and listening to the Purāṇas. The instructions given in it are valid for every situation, even outside Prayāga. Nowadays the Purāṇas, or more often the *Rāmāyaṇa* (in northern India), are recited on some particular occasions; moreover, single *kathās* taken from the Purāṇas enter as an important component in many *utsavas* or *vratas*. Those who blame the Purāṇas, which is common to other texts too, show how the practice of reading the Purāṇas was and is not accepted by all. As it is very improbable that all the objections could come from uneducated or irreligious people only, we have to suppose that the objectors were the supporters of the Vedas. Even in the actual practice at Benares, it is not uncommon to hear recitations of both Vedas and Purāṇas on the same footing. It is, moreover, a common practice to perform some ceremonies with both Vedic and Purāṇic *mantras*. According to the Ś., anyway every pilgrim at Prayāga should listen not to the Vedas but to the Purāṇas and *Prayāga Māhātmya*.

## Some features of the Pūrṇa Kumbha Mela 1977

Although the rules given in the above pages, besides being given for Māghasnāna, can be considered valid for any Kumbha Mela, yet each one has its own peculiarity. It is known that one of the sources of human behaviour, besides the Śruti and Smriti, are the *śiṣṭācāras*;[85] it is important, therefore, to know how a concrete rule is shaped at a particular time. Many things have developed since our texts were written; rules have been modified. So, nowadays most people perform their pilgrimage by train, by bus, by car, many do not cut their hairs. The Akṣayavaṭa has since long disappeared, so only very vague acts of devotion can be done towards it; also gifts and the *pūjās*, as well as *yajñas*, are quite reduced. And yet the atmosphere of Prayāga remains the same as centuries ago.

One of the aspects which remains almost unaltered is the gathering of all the Sampradāyavādīs. Sādhus, Sants, Mahantas continue to gather at Prayāga in their *pāṇḍālas* and akhāḍās or maṭhas. Even nowadays they move in procession with great pomp on the most important days of the month. This year the pomp has been a little reduced by the Government to avoid tragedies like the one that took place in 1954, when hundreds of pilgrims were killed due to the rush and confusion caused by frightened animals employed for the big processions of the sādhus. In fact, the Kumbha Melas have been often the scene of unpleasant incidents. It is attested that in 1760 CE at Haridvāra Samnyāsīs and Vairāgīs had a very bitter quarrel, with the result that 1,800 people died. Just to avoid such intemperances the Government has now laid down an order of precedence to the satisfaction of everybody, it seems.[86] Every pilgrim at Prayāga is surely keen to see this great assembly which displays all the different religious movements of the country and gives a feeling of unity and majesty.

A particular feature of this year's mela is that the Saṁgama between the Yamunā and the Gaṅgā takes place in two slightly removed localities as the Gaṅgā has been divided into two branches by the changing of its bed during the last monsoon. There are surely pilgrims who like to take a dip in both places.

As the crowds are now bigger than used to be, special arrangements have been made by the local authorities such as pontoon bridges, tented townships, hospitals, etc. and cholera inoculation has been made compulsory, a team has been established to detect small pox, etc.[87]

Anyhow, if the way of performing the pilgrimage is now more adequate to our modern times, even now as in past centuries people gather at Prayāga to get purification of their sins and attain *mukti*.

## Conclusion

Prayāga and its Kumbha Mela have been the main themes of this article. I tried to give an idea about them from the point of view both of the scholar and the devotee. The Kumbha Mela is surely very old as it is already hinted at in the seventh century CE in the books of Hsüan Tsang and Shaman Hwui Li. It seems to have started at Haridvāra and then spread to Prayāga, Ujjain and Nāsik.

Śaṅkarācārya is traditionally considered to have been its great propagator and to have transformed it into a Sādhumelā. The Kumbha Mela that recurs this year is just one sparkle of a great fire lit several centuries ago. The crowds nowadays are surely bigger than in the past; facilities of transport and increase of population make the participation more numerous. Now problems of lodging, food, sanitary organization have to be faced by the local administration. Perhaps more than in other times one perceives the social and religious impact such a gathering can have, specially if one considers the meetings, seminars, conventions, etc. that also take place on such occasions.

Prayāga becomes, at least for one month, the greatest religious attraction for millions of people. The greatness of the Tīrtharāja, which seems to have been celebrated since Vedic times and is expressed in several Purāṇic texts, is spontaneously attested to by this huge gathering of persons; Prayāga is really one of the centres of Hindu devotion. It is not uncommon in India to see people moving from far to go on long and distant pilgrimages. Going to Prayāga every twelve years, taking a dip in the holy waters of the Saṁgama and having a *darśana* of the Triveṇī have become a must for millions of devotees. Tīrtharāja is, therefore, a centre of faith and prayer, where people can meet and realize that religion is still an affair of many.

## REFERENCES

1. *Skanda Puraṇa, Avantīkh* ( Mora ed. ) II. 71.62.
2. *Skanda Puraṇa, Kaśīkh* (Mora ed.), 7.64.
3. Besides the Māgha Māhātmya, the Kārttika Māhātmya also contains sometimes a Prayāga Māhātmya, see *Padma P., Utt. Kh.* (ASS) 93 or (Mora) 91.
4. The studies on bardic literature are developing. For a general information on the problem see A.B. Lord, *The Singer of Songs*, New York, 1965; J.W. Jong, "Recent Russian Publications on the Indian Epic", in *Brahma Vidyā* : The Adyar Library Bulletin, Madras, Vol. xxxix (1975), pp. 1-42; P.L. Vaidya, Introduction to *Harivaṁśa's* critical edition, Poona, 1969, pp. xxxix-xlvii.
5. *Padma P., Utt. kh* (ASS) 237.25-27; Mbh, XIII. 108. 16-18.
6. See also P.V. Kane, History of *Dharmaśāstra*, Vol. IV, p. 562.
7. See *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa Pariśiṣṭha, Kāśīrahasya Tritīya Vibhāga,*

Calcutta (Mora ed.), 1957 and the numerous *Kāśīmāhātmyas* or *Pañcakrośīmāhātmyas* available in the Sampūrnānanda Sanskrit Visvavidyālaya. Cf MSS 16, 479; 16, 484; 16,492; 16,498 f etc...

8. H. S. Levitt, "A note on the compound Pañcalakṣaṇa in Amarasiniha's Nāmaliṅgānuśāsana," *Purāṇa*, Vol. XVIII (1), 1976, pp. 5-38.
9. *Nirukta*, 3.19.
10. See what V. Raghavan, *Sanskrit Literature*, p. 36 writes; "Purāna ... means old; a Purāṇa is therefore the account of any old myth ... old but always new, purā api nava ..."; Jaya Chamaraja Wadiyar, 'Purāṇas as the vehicle of India's philosophy of history, in *Purāṇa*, V (1), 1963, p. 6 says '... in orthodox tradition Purāṇas are described as ever fresh even as they are old-purāpi navam purānam.'
11. See *Padma P.*, *Utt. kh.* (ASS) 93, (Mora ed.) 91.
12. The quotations in the following no. 1 and 2 have been taken from Venirama Sarma Gauda, *Kumbhaparva Māhātmya*, Kāśī, Samvat 2004 (= 1947 A.D.).
13. Note that while the text has *dadāmi*, Sāyaṇa comments *dadhāmi*.
14. Other quoted passages are *Rig* V. 10.89.7; 1.116.7; *Yaj*. V. 19.87; *Ath*. V. 16.6.8.
15. It is usually placed in the *Rig* V. 10.75, commented by the *Skanda P.*, Kāśīkh, 7.54; *Padma P., Utt. Kh* (ASS) 246.35. see *Tristhalīsetu*, pp. 4, 11; M. Winternitz, *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, Vol. I, pp. 51-52.
16. For other references to Vedic texts about *tīrthas*, see Kane, *op. cit.*, IV. 954.
17. See Samuel Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, Vol. II, p. 253.
18. See Samuel Beal, *Life of Huen Tsiang*, pp. 184-187.
19. In fact, there is no hint that Śaṅkarācārya was aware of any Kumbha Mela at Prayāga. "Some think that originally this fair belonged to the Nāgās only and gradually sādhus of different sects came to be associated with it on account of its highly religious character or fervor. A large number of nuns also attend the fair". R.S. Bhattacharya, "The Kumbhaparvan", *Hindutva*, Jan. 1977, p. 1.
20. All these news can be found in Venirama Sarma Gauda, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14 and 30-31.
21. It is supported by Veṇīrāma Śarma Gauḍa, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
22. Variants of this story can be found in J. H. Dave, *Immortal India*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1960, Vol. I, p. 27; and R. S. Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
23. The text is quoted from Venirama Sarma Gauda, *op. cit.* pp. 6-8. See an introductory study of the churning of the ocean in V. M. Bedekar, "The legend of the churning of the ocean in the epics and the Purāṇas : A comparative study," *Purāṇa*, IX. 1. (Jan., 1967), pp. 7-61.

24. The śl. are quoted from Venirama Sarma Gauda, *op. cit.*, 16-17.
25. By Syama Sundaradas, Vols. 1-7, printed at Allahabad, 1916-28.
26. See Venirama Sarma Gauda, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
27. This śl. is similar to what. Kane, *op. cit.*, IV, 287 says, "The Sun and the Moon should be in Makararāśi, Jupiter in Taurus (Viṣabha), there is *amāvāsyā* : this is called Kumbhayoga." The eminent author who is speaking of the Kumbhaparvan at Prayāga, does not give the source of his statement.
28. See *Padma P.*, *Utt. Kh* (ASS), 126. 33; 127. 162 etc.
29. The only slightly discordant text being *Prayāga Māhātmya* (Venk.), I. 5 e d. *makarasthe gurau māghe makarasthe divākare* and a few others.
30. It is important to note that there is no clear mention of the Kumbhayoga in astronomical works dealing with the *yogas*.
31. R. S. Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
32. See R. S. Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-9.
33. Kane, *op. cit.*, IV. 567.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 569.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 583.
36. *Prayāga Māhātmya* (Venk.), 4.4-10.
37. This seems to be on a different line than the *Krityakalpataru*, Gaekwad's Oriental Series, Baroda, Vol. X (*Śuddhikāṇḍa*) p. 169 quoting Brihaspati in his Samskāra, p. 28.
38. Kane, *op. cit.*, IV. 597- 98.
39. Quoted in *Tristhalīsetu*, p. 13; see Ś. 33. 14 cd. I remind here what the *Tristhalīsetu*, p. 13 discusses and Kane, *op. cit.*, IV. 598 repeats in English about the double grammatical gender of Prayāga, which is masculin or neuter according to the words it is joined with.
40. "Prayag or Allahabad", *Modern Review*, Calcutta, 1910, p. 652.
41. *ayodhyā mathurā māyā kāśī kāñcī avantikā /*
    *purī dvārāvatī caiva saptaitā mokṣadāyikāḥ*
    *Bhūtaśuddhitantra* quoted in *Śabdakalpadruma* s. v. Ayodhyā. Note that Prayāga is not counted among them, although the Ś. presupposes its presence.
42. In fact, he speaks of about 13 of them in *op. cit.*, IV. 614-15 but very shortly, although with many references to the sources.
43. See "Prayāga Māhātmya–A Study," in *Purāṇa*, Vol. IX (1), (Jan. 1967), pp. 103-120.
44. Kane, *op. cit.*, IV. 598.
45. See Ś. 32.40; Kane, *op. cit.*, p. 598, fn. 1357.
46. See Ś. 32. 41-42; Kane, *op. cit.* p. 599, fn. 1358.

47. See Kane, *op. cit.*, IV. 600; the author gives the references of Mbh and some Purāṇas where this word is introduced to describe the Saṁgama at Prayāga.
48. See S. 34.15; also *Tristhalīsetu*, p. 8. and the Purāṇas quoted in Kane, *op. cit.*, IV. 600.
49. See *Prayāga Māhātmya* (Venk.), II. 18; *Padma P.*, *Svarga kh.* (Mora ed.), 43. 39; 45.4, 9 etc.
50. The article "Prayag or Allahabad", p. 655 quotes the following important *tīrthas* to be visited by a pilgrim :
    *triveṇī mādhavam somam bharadvājam ca vāsukim /*
    *vaṇḍe ākṣyavaṭam śeṣam prayāge tīrthanāyakam //*
51. See Ś. 35.
52. See Ś. 44-45.
53. See Ś. 35. 53-56; 39. 20-23, etc.
54. See Ś. 8.11 ff; 32. 29-38, etc.
55. See Ś. 99.52.
56. See Ś. 34.21-24 for Gaṅgā; 34. 25-30 for Yamunā and 34. 31-48 for Sarasvatī.
57. *Tristhalīsetu*, p. 8. The śl. is quoted from the *Kūrma P.* (35.8) and not from the *Matsya P.* (105.11) which has *samāsādya* instead of *samāśritya*.
58. *Prayāga Māhātmya* 4.21, which takes it from the *Matsya* but modifies it changing Rudra with Śiva. The Śaiv flavour of the *śloka*, surely belonging to bardic tradition, which affirms that Śiva stays at Prayāga as *Vaṭa* is out of place in a text which claims to be Vaiṣṇava and clearly states that the *Vaṭa* is sacred to Mādhava (see Ś. 72.16-17).
59. The *Tristhalīsetu* devotes pp. 47-55 to discuss the problem of suicide at Prayāga explaining the different ways of giving up one's own life.
60. Ś. 32.8-10.
61. See Ś. 9, specially śl. 1-14.
62. The persistence of the cult and devotion to it is attested also by the article "Prayag or Allahabad" in 1910.
63. See Ś. 73. 1-9.
64. See Ś. 32. 19-27; 34. 18-20; Mbh, III. 35.70ff and Kane, *op. cit.*, IV. 600.
65. See Ś. 4.42; 36.48, etc. and several Purāṇas.
66. Ś.. 33.39-43.
67. The three days permanence has been exalted in the Purāṇas, see *Padma P.*, *Utt. kh* (ASS) 246; *Nārada P.*, II. 63.75ff; and specially *Tristhalīsetu*, pp. 33.34.
68. Note that the *Tristhalīsetu* (pp. 16-17) speaks of *Prayāgavāsa*, but this does not call it *kalpavāsa*. See also *Matsya P.*, 103.17.

69. Ś. 9. 35-37, 36.23-48.

70. These terms refer to different kinds of penances, see Kane, *op. cit.*, IV. 132ff.

71. Ś. 39.1-38.

72. *Ibid.* 39. 3-4.

73. Which takes place when Saturn is in Meṣa, the Moon and Jupiter in Siṁha and the Sun in Śrāvaṇa-nakṣatra, see Ś. 51.1-57.

74. See *Tristhalīsetu*, p. 33 and Kane, *op. cit.*, IV. 617.

75. One can consult Ś. 49.9-29.

76. See Venirama Sarma Gauda, *Kumbhaparva Māhātmya*, p. 34.

77. In the following way :

    *dakṣāṅguṣṭhaṁ paroṅguṣṭhe kṣiptvā hastadvyena ca /*
    *sāvakaśāṁ muṣṭikāṁ ca kuryat sa kumbhamudrikā //*
    Venirama Sarma Gauda, *op. cit.*, p. 34 fn.

78. It can be noted that while in *Tristhalīsetu* (p. 27) and *Prayāga Māhātmya* (Venk, 4.11-16) Kanyādāna is also described as extremely meritorious at Prayāga, there is no mention of it in Ś., although it is used even nowadays, at least in the sense given by Kane, *op. cit.*, II. 533.

79. See Kane, *op. cit.*, II. 837ff.

80. See Kane, *op. cit.*, IV. 578-81.

81. Ś. 65; Kane, *op. cit.*, V. 56ff.

82. It can be studied in Kane, *op. cit.*, II. 924-28; III. 939, 948-49; IV. 603-614 and in some specialized books on suicide.

83. See Ś. 20-23 for *śrāddhas*; Ś. 16 and 65 for *Lakṣahoma* and *yajña*; Ś. 10-11; 46. 10-21; 17.31-39 for the other *pūjās*.

84. See *Padma P., Utt. kh.* (ASS), 245.16, 23.

85. Kane, *op. cit.*, III, 825ff, *Manu Smriti*, II.6.

86. The following is the order of precedence, generally followed at the time of bath. "At Haridvāra, Nirañjanī Akhāḍā goes first accompanied by Jūnā, Ānanda and Āvāhana Akhāḍās. Next goes Nirvāṇī Akhāḍā accompanied by Aṭala. At Allahabad Nirvāṇī Akhāḍā accompanied by Aṭala goes first, then Nirañjanī accompanied by Jūnā, Ānanda. In Nāsik, Jūnā Akhāḍā goes first. In Ujjain, all the Akhāḍās go in a line". R.S. Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, p. 9; Svami Sadananda Giri, *Society and Sannyāsins*, p. 61.

87. See "The Hindusthan Times", Wednesday, Dec. 8, 1976.

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